

Sunday, March 12
9:00 & 11:00am



“The Water of Life”
March 12, 2023 | Third Sunday in Lent
Charlie Berthoud | John 4:7-15

“In life and in death we belong to God.”

This affirmation is the core of our Lenten sermon series and a message I hope we can all take to heart. Please say it with me:

“In life and in death we belong to God.”

These are also the first words of the Presbyterian Church USA’s “A Brief Statement of Faith.”

Those of you in the sanctuary can find this statement on page 37 of the hymnal. And you can find it in Spanish and Korean in subsequent pages.

Statement concludes with a similar affirmation:

we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Lent is the season leading up to Holy Week, when we remember the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, so as we ponder his life and death and new life of Jesus, we are focused on our own death and life issues.

The gospel reading today is one of many in John’s gospel that tell us about the new and abundant life God offers the world in Jesus Christ. As you heard, in John 4, Jesus says: “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

John has references to “life” throughout.

- John’s gospel opens with an affirmation of life. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (John 1:1-4)
- In the middle of the gospel, Jesus says, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)
- In John 11:25, Jesus proclaims: “I am the resurrection and the life.”
- In John 14:6, Jesus proclaims, “I am the way and the truth and the life.”
- Near the end of John we read that the gospel was written “so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

So clearly we who call ourselves Christians need to be mindful of what this “life” is all about.

Last week, we heard the story of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus in John 3, and we heard the proclamation of Jesus “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

In Clara’s excellent sermon last week, she acknowledged that we may not know exactly what happens when we die, but we can be hopeful in the promise that in life and in death, we belong to God. If you missed the sermon, you should find it on our webpage or get a hardcopy from the church office.

Last week our focus was on Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus in John 3. Today we focus on the woman at the well and her encounter with Jesus in John 4. Side by side, these encounters are rather striking.

Nicodemus—John 3	Woman at the well—John 4
Night time meeting--dark	Noon time meeting--light
Man	Woman
Named	Unnamed
Educated, a teacher	Probably uneducated
Pharisee, influential religious leader	Samaritan, a despised foreigner
Important, a “somebody”	A “nobody”

By the standards of the day 2000 years ago, it's rather stunning that Jesus would even talk with an unnamed, foreign, female "nobody" much less offer her a promise, saying: "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

This promise of "living water" is intriguing. So let's think about water for a bit.

Water makes up something like 60% of the human body, and water covers about 70% of the face of the earth.

Water is essential to life. A human can go days even weeks without food, but not more than a couple days without water.

Water helps us stay clean.

Water is refreshing and reinvigorating—from a polar plunge (something I've never done and don't plan to do!), to a relaxing shower, to a swim in the ocean on a warm summer day.

Water is vital in our faith as well. You could say water runs through the Bible.

- The Bible begins with the wind of God sweeping over the chaos of the waters, and the Bible concludes with a vision of the River of Life.
- The story of Noah and the flood reminds us of God's concern for sin and God offering a second chance.
- The people of Israel are saved from slavery as they cross the Red Sea.
- The prophet Amos spoke out against corruption and greed saying "let justice flow like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

And then there is baptism, the beautiful, mysterious, and wonderful sacrament when we are claimed by God.


Water is obviously essential in baptism, the sacrament in which we celebrate that we are connected in the church of Jesus Christ and that we are beloved children of God.

At baptisms, sometimes we read from Romans 6—a passage that we often read at funerals as well.

The words connect baptism, life, and death. I invite you to read Romans 6 with me now.

Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.



Romans 6.3-5

I love being a Presbyterian. But sometimes I think we get it wrong with baptism, where we traditionally just sprinkle a little water on the person’s head.

Other traditions dunk and immerse and submerge baptismal candidates more vigorously, representing death to sin and evil, and coming alive as new people, emerging from the water with new life. As Rachel Held Evans wrote:

“The oldest baptism rites declared God’s power over death. Many of the first baptismal fonts were shaped as coffins, and baptisms took place just before sunrise on Easter morning to recall Christ’s triumph over the grave. The Christian’s descent into the water represents a surrender, a death, to the old way of living. Emergence represents a resurrection, a starting over again.”

--Rachel Held Evans, in *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*

Even at the tender moments of baptizing a baby, we’re remembering the reality of death, along with the promise of life.

In life and in death, we belong to God.

Thus from the baptism onward, we need to be aware of the precious gift of life and the need to keep talking about life and death issues.

While it’s urgent for us to talk with loved ones about life and death issues, as Christians, as people who follow a teacher who calls us to love our neighbors, we need to think

about life and death issues for our neighbors.

In terms of water, we here in Madison rarely think about how great it is that we have easily accessible clean water. Some of us know from personal experience what it's like when we drink unclean water. Some of us have been places where people die because of unsafe drinking water. From Flint Michigan to plenty of places around the world, water is too often hard to access and/or unsafe to drink.

Over the years, with our Guatemala partnership, we have been able to learn and help a little bit with clean and safe drinking water. Because of the generosity of this church, we've provided dozens of water filters in rural areas of Guatemala. I and several other people from this church have had that water.

In Matthew 25, Jesus makes the value of water explicit, saying "I was thirsty and you gave me a drink."

Water is a life and death issue for many people in the world. We who live with clean water all around us and we who follow Jesus need to remember this.

We need to be thinking about how to receive the living water ourselves, and how to provide living water for others.

And we need to remember: In the gospel for today, Jesus offers this unnamed "nobody" the living water.

If you keep reading, you learn that this unnamed foreign woman had marital issues, which made her even more of an outcast. And yet Jesus offers her the good news of living water springing up to abundant, eternal life.

This is the good news of the gospel, that the promise of abundant eternal life is for everyone. In life and death, we ALL belong to God.





In that spirit, I'm particularly glad that we have made a connection with SOLACE FRIENDS—a relatively new organization that essentially helps poor and often homeless people who are nearing death.

Their mission is to be a place “where underserved individuals can receive housing and personal attention that nurtures physical comfort, emotional and spiritual wholeness, and individual dignity as they die.”

Covenant has provided dollars and volunteer hours to help Solace Friends work, as they care for the people that Jesus paid special attention to, those who are on the margins, forgotten, ignored—perhaps like that Samaritan woman.



During this season of Lent as we follow Jesus to the cross and onto Easter Sunday, as we think about living life in all its fullness and about dying well, we need to keep talking, studying, and praying about:

- Making plans for cremation, burial, or organ donation
- Lining up medical power of attorney
- Getting our affairs and lives in order, thinking about how we want to be remembered
- Pondering scripture and music for a memorial service
- Carrying for those who mourn

And as we consider these things for ourselves and our loved ones, we need to remember the call to love our neighbors, all of our neighbors.

In life and in death, we ALL belong to God. Amen.