

I see a well. Jacob's well. A traditional place of betrothal. The well is deep. No river or stream nearby to feed it. The water is stationary, contained within the earth, buried deep below the surface where it cannot be seen.

I see an outsider, a Galilean man, resting there, non-threateningly, peaceably. He is tired. From the journey behind, and perhaps as well from knowledge of the journey that lies ahead.

I see a local woman who has been here many times. This is the place where many men have gathered to quench their thirst, and where many women have performed their duties. Not all encounters are rooted in good intentions. Everyone comes here to drink their fill. Even animals.

In recent weeks, thanks to the corona virus, we've coined a new phrase: social distancing. On one hand, it's good practice at times like these, to take practical precautions so that we can protect the vulnerable. On the other hand, this phrase "social distancing" evokes (for me, at least) a lot of different images. There is the polite refrain from a handshake for the benefit of preventing viral contamination, but there is also segregation, profiling, and institutional -isms (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) to name just a few. 'Social distancing' is not new – we've gotten really good at it over a long period of time.

Do you see what I see?

She has not come by night – she harbors no secrets, has nothing to hide. The midday sun is hot, she is thirsty. And she believes she has nothing to lose.

"Give me a drink." This man is thirsty, too.

She gets the irony, the ridiculousness of it all. He has no bucket. He has no sense of propriety. She is beneath him.

Unwritten rules are broken, a different sort of scandal is taking place.

And yet he engages her, not as a man engages a woman at a well at midday, but respectfully, as his equal. Does he not understand? Does he not know?

I see her earthen jar, bone dry. I see her eyes, squinting in the bright light of the Son, brimming with questions.

As a people of faith, this concept of ‘social distancing’ ought to feel foreign to us. I imagine nearly all of us are feeling awkward greeting one another little more than head nods, because this is not who we are, is it? Could this be our desert time, our time to reflect on the ways we have allowed ourselves, our deepest selves, to be distanced from one another?

While we always strive to protect the health and safety of one another, the changes we’re making to our corporate worship life are temporary. But I’m struck by the gestures of love and generosity that are emerging: some of you have offered to go shopping or run by the pharmacy for loved ones who have chosen to stay home. Some of you have found creative ways to connect to others through social media. Many of you are calling family members or other church members to check on them and let them know you’re thinking of them. Perhaps this is our Lenten discipline, our take-away, to be lived out past the Easter release from fear and quarantine and on through ‘Ordinary Time.’

Do you hear what I hear?

‘Who are you?’ she asks. It’s a question I’ve asked a million times.

I think I see his smirk: not of amusement, not of condescension, but of respect for her spunk, her willingness to engage.

He explains, “This water will not satisfy you. The water I give, however, will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Our culture has been marinating in the chaotic waters of anxiety for long enough. So let’s turn our attention and energy toward prayerfully considering how we can be meaningfully present to one another, how we can be creatures of God’s Living waters. While I fear that I may unwittingly pass on illness to others, my greater fear for all of us is that “[social] distancing, if misplaced or misunderstood, will take its toll not only upon our community’s strength and resiliency, but upon the very integrity and meaning of our spiritual commitment. Therefore, every hand that we don’t shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.”¹

Jesus was not bound by the rules of social distance as he related to others. Rather, he went the distance for the sake of deeper spiritual connection and relationship with the whole world ~ Jew and Samaritan, male and female, virtuous and less-than-virtuous.

Do you know what I know?

I listen as he gently speaks her truth: this woman of the well has known many men.

She begins to see. This thirsty man, this Giver of Living Water, who speaks to her as an equal understands her, knows her. She sees, and begins to lean in to this new kind of knowing.

She understands he is a prophet and knows the Messiah is coming. He declares I AM.

¹ Rav Yosef Kanefsky

I see the jar, still bone dry, abandoned on the ground beside the well.
She thirsts no more. She thought she had nothing to lose, but now she
has gained everything.

She goes to her people and joy spills out of her. ‘Come and see! Come
and see, and draw from the well of the Living Water! He will bring us
goodness and light.’

—

I’ll close with a poem about incarnate love written by Br. Richard
Hendrick, OFM this past Friday entitled Lockdown:

Yes there is fear.

Yes there is isolation.

Yes there is panic buying.

Yes there is sickness.

Yes there is even death.

But,

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise

You can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet

The sky is no longer thick with fumes

But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi

People are singing to each other across the empty squares,

keeping their windows open

so that those who are alone may hear the sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland

Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.

Today a young woman I know is busy spreading fliers with her number
through the neighbourhood

So that the elders may have someone to call on.

Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples
are preparing to welcome

and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary
All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting
All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way
All over the world people are waking up to a new reality
To how big we really are.
To how little control we really have.
To what really matters.
To Love.
So we pray and we remember that
Yes there is fear.
But there does not have to be hate.
Yes there is isolation.
But there does not have to be loneliness.
Yes there is panic buying.
But there does not have to be meanness.
Yes there is sickness.
But there does not have to be disease of the soul
Yes there is even death.
But there can always be a rebirth of love.
Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.
Today, breathe.
Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic
The birds are singing again
The sky is clearing,
Spring is coming,
And we are always encompassed by Love.
Open the windows of your soul
And though you may not be able to touch across the empty square,
Sing.²

² Richard Hendrick, OFM March 13, 2020
https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10158376520681617&id=211490781616