

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent March 8, 2026 jj  
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✠ sdg ✠

How safe is your Messiah? Is He a merely good friend for you to call on when you're in a jam and you need some good advice to help you get back on the path to success? Does He promise to stay out of the messy, embarrassing details of your life? Who would want that uncomfortable silence, eyes averted to avoid a penetrating gaze, whether it's done in kindness or not? That wouldn't be a safe Messiah. If we had wanted a confrontation with a holy man who issues a call for our repentance and will never, ever back down until we give in, then we'd be all set with someone like John the Baptist. He was fearless, strict, all black-and-white, no gray areas with him! He would regularly baptize scores and scores of people who heard his scathing message, confessed their sins to him, and prayed with John for the true Messiah finally to come and make everything better for everyone.

It seems pretty obvious from our Holy Gospel today that the Samaritan woman of John chapter 4 would have wanted a safe Messiah. In fact, it may have been likely that she hadn't given much thought to any kind of Messiah in a long time. Why would that be? As a Samaritan, she belonged to a race of people who fiercely struck out on their own independence. For numerous generations, they said no to God's appointed and anointed king. They turned up their noses at the Jerusalem Temple as the Lord's designated place to meet His people with forgiveness and purification. They told themselves that their Hebrew ancestor, Joseph, was a good man, blessed by God, so his mummified bones buried on the northern mountain had to provide just as good a place to worship God as the gaudy building down

south erected by those worthless sons of King David. John the Evangelist reminds us that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. This woman was keenly aware of that steep cultural divide, and you could tell she was defensive about that from the time Jesus opened His mouth to talk to this forbidden, foreign woman. If you were to ask her, I suppose she would say she'd have preferred someone safer to talk to while she lowered her bucket to draw water to take back home.

She was thirsty. Biological necessity and the social conventions of the day drove her to this mountain well near Joseph's ancient tomb day after day. The woman was weary of walking this wavy, watery line separating life and death, heading this way with an empty bucket, trudging that way carrying it heavy and full, then watching it go empty at home all too quickly. She was also thirsty in another way, a way that this ordinary water had no hope of quenching. Her emptiness inside was certainly due to sin. Any safe Messiah could tell you that, and then he would just walk away and give you some space to figure it out on your own.

Jesus doesn't do that. He isn't a safe Messiah. Instead He tells her that He has this better, more thirst-quenching living water to give away for free. It sounds too good to be true, just like any of our Lord's promises and gifts might sound like to you from time to time. As Nicodemus in John 3 only thought of the impossibility of going back to his mother's womb to be born again, this woman of Samaria could only think about finally ending her back-breaking repetitive chore of hiking up the hill to fetch

yet another pail of water. Yet Jesus doesn't speak to the woman, nor to you listening to Him today, about ordinary water that one might drink and become thirsty all over again. This water from Jacob's famous well is about as helpful to your spiritual condition as the man who dug it—he's been long dead already. He's not the Messiah. Like the Samaritan woman, the prospect of receiving a living water that constantly renews in your heart sounds like an attractive option to the dryness and spiritual thirst you have to endure from time to time.

Then, as the story unfolds, Jesus, the not-so-safe Messiah, makes His move at just the right time: Go, call your husband, and come back here. Did He really just go there? That doesn't seem polite! But Jesus isn't interested in polite. He's a Messiah who is intensely focused on quenching this woman's thirst, that is, forgiving her sins, renewing her love for the Lord who made her and called her to be His bride in the marriage bond of faith. Yet it was marriage itself that was not kind to this woman. The likely scenario is that five husbands said No to her, writing up a certificate of divorce and sending her away. Leery of repeating the same outcome, the woman entered into her current relationship without the Divine blessing of marriage. Likewise for you, the righteous law of God says to you No, you have not deserved His good pleasure, you were sent away with temporal and eternal punishment as your reward. What you would hope would remain secret is very laid bare before the eyes of our God and judge. Your sinful human nature would rather desire God's benefits without having to repent, deny yourself, take up your cross, or love your neighbor. That's not safe. The temptation is strong to be defensive, put up

your guard, and change the subject, hoping for a safer Messiah to come along.

Just as with the Samaritan woman, though, so also with you: Jesus doesn't condemn, He doesn't reprimand, yet doesn't avoid the sin and the damage it has done, either. We heard from John 3 last week: For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world would be saved through Him. Even when another woman was caught in the act of adultery, He resisted the crowd that was pushing for violent justice, a retribution that thirsted for her death by stoning. Instead, He thirsted for her trust, for a renewed relationship with a fallen, but still precious creature, not without hope, but capable of redemption, of rescue from the evils that threaten you as well.

Christ the Rock of your salvation was stricken to death on the rod of the cross so that life-giving springs of water would well up in you. Your forgiveness pours out upon your head in a baptismal flood, and your spiritual thirst is finally and fully quenched. At just the right time, while we were still lost and condemned sinners, He died for you and gave you life that will never run dry. Your baptism is for you that wavy, watery line that you tread in this earthly life. It will be wearying at times, since you are still on that dividing line, the threshold between sinner and saint, life and death. But fear not! This is precisely the reason why your Messiah is not the safe Messiah. He won't abandon you to figure it out for yourself. He has done it all, fills up your bucket, and in resurrected, living presence right here today in your midst, He binds Himself to you, and you to Him in a Divine Service rich with forgiveness, life and peace guaranteed to be yours.

The thirsting, complaining Israelites had cried out, Is the Lord among us or not? Of course He is! This is how He assures you He is with you! He invites you into His holy presence, to praise Him with angels, archangels, all the company of heaven, including your dearly departed loved ones. He showers you with wedding gifts to seal you in complete unity with Him. And since you are fully united with Jesus, you are also united in love to one another, free to drop all animosity toward them because Jesus has soaked it all up when He thirsted for your sins and hurts on the cross. This is the living water that continues on in your heart, a water of life that no false Messiah could ever give you. Only Jesus, the true Christ, is your complete Savior. Worship Him in Spirit and in truth, that is, trust that your Baptism has washed away all your sins, and that His truth cleanses you, makes you the holy possession of your heavenly Father, precious in His sight. The elevation here in this place may be close to sea level, but since we're gathered here in His name, you are now on the true holy mountain of God, forgiven, cleansed, renewed, alive!

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.