

March 8, 2026
St. John's Tappahannock
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
John 4:5-42

I begin with a poem from our Lenten Poetry Booklet, Wendell Berry and the Sabbath Poetry of Lent. **1**

“How Long does it take to get to the Woods?”

How long does it take to make the woods?

As long as it takes to make the world.

*The woods is present as the world is, the presence
of all its past, and of all its time to come.*

*It is always finished, it is always being made, the act
of its making forever greater than the act of its destruction.*

*It is a part of eternity, for its end and beginning
belong to the end and beginning of all things,*

The beginning lost in the end, the end and the beginning...

What is the way to the woods? How do you go there?

By climbing up through the 6th days field,

kept in all the bodies ears, the bodies

sorrow, weariness and joy, by passing through

the narrow gate on the far side of that field

*where the pasture grass of the body's life gives way
to the high, original standing of the trees.*

*By coming into the shadow, the shadow of the grace of the strait
way's ending,
the shadow of the mercy of light.*

Why must the gate be narrow?

Because you cannot pass beyond it burdened.

*To come in among these trees you must leave behind
the six days world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes.*

*You must come without weapon or tool, alone,
expecting nothing, remembering nothing,*

*into the ease of sight, the brotherhood and sisterhood of eye and
leaf.*

There is a pattern, created by God in Genesis, of a seven day week, with 6 days of creativity and work, and one day of rest and contemplation of the Creator's love for all things; one informs the other and the tapestry includes all.

Yet the line is space in this poem is formed by the woods and the field – the woods are like the eternal beyond our temporal lives. Sabbath is a way to taste eternal life here and now. To come in among the trees you must leave behind/the six days world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes.

Speaking of patterns, John uses them in his gospel effectively. A parallel can be drawn between the woman at the well who sought water, and the crowds who sought bread in another story.

John 6:30-35

³⁰ So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?’ ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” ³² Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which^[a] comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ ³⁴ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’ ³⁵ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’

Jesus offered *living* water and *true* bread when the Samaritan woman said “Sir give me this water” and the crowd said, “Sir give us this bread”.

In both there is also a pattern of encounter, a partial understanding, then a fuller understanding and invitation. This pattern helped both ancient and modern readers to move beyond narrow minded ideas and thinking into trust in God, and to see the meaning of the living water and true bread to refer to fullness of life now, eternal life in Christ. As we read in today’s gospel, ‘¹⁴ ... those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’

The woman at the well, being a Samaritan, would have been ostracized simply because of the historical animosity between the Jewish and Samaritan communities. In the words of Matthew Myers Boulton of Harvard Divinity School, “In Jesus’ day, Samaritans were the descendants of generations of intermarriage between (a) Jews left behind during the Babylonian exile and (b) Gentiles the conquering Assyrians settled in Israel. Thus Samaritans shared a common heritage with Jews, but also were quite different: for example, while Samaritans held that the proper place to worship God was Mount Gerizim (see Deut 11:29), Jews held that it was instead the Jerusalem Temple. Imagine Roman Catholics and Protestants in early modern Europe, with their mutual bigotries, suspicions, and appetites for vengeance. Jews and Samaritans were likewise enemies, their similarities only sharpening their contempt.”

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And then we might make assumptions about the choices of a woman with many husbands, when there could be many reasons for that situation, especially in the harsh historical times in which this story takes place. In any case, what struck the Samaritan woman was the fact that Jesus looked into her heart, and saw her life. It was not what he saw that they spoke about in depth. It was that he saw into her heart and mind that captured her attention. Jesus knew she needed to shift from allowing others to define her to claiming her own self-worth. She was clearly knowledgeable about her Jewish heritage, the importance of Jacob’s well to her people, and the expectation of the Messiah, and she was a woman of faith. Having met and listened to Jesus, the Living Water, the Samaritan woman was filled with new life, a sense of purpose, and a yearning to offer

that transformative experience to others by sharing what happened, which resulted in her becoming a disciple in her own right. She moved from isolation to community because of her new inner sense of acceptance by Jesus who looked into her heart and healed it, and empowered her to claim him as the expected Messiah as well as her own personal gifts.

It seems some followers who become leaders within the community share this pattern of lack of acceptance, to acceptance through a transformative experience, and subsequent blossoming into their true self. That was Paul's message today in Romans as well.

Romans. ①7_77. (included for people reading sermon)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ through whom we have obtained access^[b] to this grace in which we stand; and we^[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ⁹ And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁰ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ¹ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

²For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ³Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁴But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁵Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.^[e] ⁷⁶ For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been

reconciled, will we be saved by his life.⁷⁷ But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The first paragraph from Romans constitutes a major tenant of Lutheran theology, that we should rejoice that we are justified by grace, not by good works. In other words, we are not forgiven because of anything we do, but because of God's unconditional love for his creatures and his creation. We do not earn grace by good works, our good works are a loving response to our loving God. And if we are going to boast, we should boast about that fact of God's amazing love for us, not our good works.

That kind of thinking led to the selling of indulgences to get to heaven in the middle ages and started the Reformation. Earning one's place in heaven got distorted into buying one's way. And rather than use the word *boast*, *rejoice* perhaps gets closer to what Paul meant. We should rejoice that because of God's understanding of our human frailty, we have opportunities to grow, and in fact to expect growing pains. Thus the poetic verse: *"...but we also [rejoice] in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,^o and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,^o and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."*

And the second concept to highlight in this passage is that while some find difficulty accepting it, God died for *all of us*. Sinners and righteous alike. For that we should all rejoice. Because it should enable personal transformation on the part of the sinner, and build community.

Knowing what happened in the Samaritan Woman at the Well story, where an ostracized person who was sinful in some unstated way, is now a thriving member of the community because of her transformation made possible by her encounter with Jesus, we see an expectation. Those who are forgiven are expected to change their behavior, again, out of love and gratitude for God's grace. Change is gradual of course, but that is the goal. That is where and how we can have hope for reconciliation...with God and with one another. Thus what we really have here is an example of bridge building.

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the World." We are all children of the Light. We all bring different gifts of personality to the table. And together we exemplify to others that Christian community welcomes all, and we are at our best when we seek to build each other up to be strong servants in a world that desperately needs repair.

Jesus said, "Listen carefully: I am sending you out like sheep among wolves; so be wise as serpents, and innocent as doves." (Matthew 10:16) He said this after choosing his disciples, and then preparing them for their work of bringing the gospel to a hostile world. It's about being clever enough to navigate challenges without becoming malicious or jaded, and kind without being naive or easily harmed. But as Yahweh said to the Israelites, who complained constantly in the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan, "This is hard, but it is not too hard for you." (Deut. 30:11-14) And God provided for them. Jesus will also provide us with living water, bread and insight in order to achieve *his* agenda, in this life, so we can be confident against all adversity.

In closing I leave you with this brief poem by Wendell Berry.

The incarnate word is with us.

Is still speaking, is present

Always, but leaves no sign

But everything that is. **3**

Let us rejoice in that!

Amen

1. Wendell Berry, *This Day - Sabbath Poems 1979-2012*; *How long does it take to get to the Woods?*; Counterpoint, CA; 2011; pg. 67
2. Matthew Myers Boulton; commentary for lectionary 3.8.26; www.saltproject.org
3. Wendell Berry, *ibid.* p. 203
4. The Holy Bible; NRSV; Thomas Nelson, Inc.; latest edition 1971