

“Hope So”

Psalms 42: 1-2, 11; Lamentations 3:21-26;
Revelation 22:16-17; John 4:5-15

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December 2, 2012

It is the first Sunday of Advent, so as we come, we are entering a new season. One of the ways that I think about this season is that it's the season of gifts. Part of that is because it's the season in which I'm always thinking about what gifts I need to get and give to other people. I wonder what gifts I will get this season or what gifts other people will receive. So there's a lot of thinking about gifts.

As I was thinking about this, I was thinking, “What does it mean? What's a gift?” We all have a sense of that, but sometimes I step back and give a little thought to what a gift is in a more analytical sense. What are the definitions of *gift*? One is, when you give a gift, it's generally something you do voluntarily. Something that you don't do voluntarily has a hard time being a gift. Sometimes we blur these lines, but generally we think about a gift as something that is voluntarily given.

Then, when we receive a gift, we generally recognize that it's something we didn't earn or that we didn't expect. Like I said, we blur these lines a lot, but I think in the idea of gift is a recognition that I didn't really earn the gift. If I earned it, it's a paycheck or it's something else other than a gift, right? There's a sense of voluntary giving and an unearned receiving.

Finally, once the gift is received and we have the gift, we sometimes recognize its use as something that was given us, and we get to give from it. We talk about the gifts of the Spirit, for example. Something we don't think we deserved that was voluntarily given to us that we get to use for the common good, for the good of all.

So while I think we blur all those lines, I think there is in the idea of *gift* a sense of voluntary giving, an unearned receiving, and then an ability to use that gift as it's given to us. As I think about all of that, I begin to think about what Jesus said to the woman at the well. “If you had known, you could have asked and I would have given you the gift of God.”

When we think about a gift being given, I don't suppose Jesus was wrapping it up and handing it to her, but when I think of a gift what I think of is something wrapped with a bow on it. When I see a gift all wrapped up, whether it's for me or for somebody else, there's a sense of anticipation. I wonder what's inside. There's that moment of hope. What is it? Especially if it's for me, I begin to get all kinds of ideas. What do I hope for? What could it be?

When somebody gives me a gift, sometimes I notice that it's nicely wrapped, but I might also want to shake it, and then I might turn it over to look at the other side. Imagine if I picked up a gift and turned it over, and water came pouring out. Living water. So the idea is that what Jesus talks about is the gift of living water. In some ways it's a

surprising thing to think about as a gift from God—living water. The woman hears “living water” but it could also mean running water or flowing water, and she almost ends where we might end, thinking, “Is Jesus going to bring running water to my house? Then I won’t have to come here anymore. I will never be thirsty.” We know it’s not quite that, is it? It’s not that running water that we all have these days and are pretty thankful for. But it is a way in which God is doing something in her life.

It’s interesting that Jesus uses water as a metaphor, because, what are we, 55-65% water? It’s clearly an essential piece of who we are. It makes up most of the body. We can’t go long without it. When we think about water, we think of how important it is. He’s not talking about some stagnant pool. He’s talking about living water, running water.

I can hardly think about water without thinking about the negative—being in the desert. Maybe I’ve just watched too many of those old B-movies or cartoons where somebody is crawling through the desert and they see before them the oasis. They run and jump in, but come up with a handful of sand. What that makes me think about is how there are moments in my life in which I’ll see one thing or another and think, “That’s it! That’s my living water! All I need is that!” Then I get closer and closer and find it’s not exactly what I thought it would be. I don’t know how many times I have thought, “This is it!” and found, well... Maybe it’s not always like sand running through your fingers, but there’s a little of that experience. It’s not quite what I expected.

So when I hear Jesus saying he’s bringing the gift of God, the living water, there’s something that must be really special. It’s no mirage that he’s bringing. Now, he doesn’t exactly say in this text what that living water is. There’s a hint that it’s what gives us life, and that it’s dynamic, it’s not stagnant, it’s running, it’s fresh water, streams of water. He goes on to say it’s like a spring gushing up to eternal life.

So we have a sense of what he’s talking about. If we were to think further about some of the other scriptures we read today—God’s mercy new every morning; God’s steadfast love and faithfulness—we begin to think about what some of those things are that make up this living water. We recognize in Jesus, in fact, the one who brings that living water into our lives.

The point of this is that as Jesus encounters the woman at the well and tells her she can have living water, it’s not like he suddenly takes water and dumps it on her and says, “Now you’re alive.” He’s inviting her to know it, to let it become part of her life. It’s in that invitation that I see hope. What he’s doing is breaking the despair of her life and bringing the light of hope into it. That’s a good place to start. It’s a good place to start Advent, to think about how God is willing to enter into our lives and invite us in, to know that there’s living water, that there is a spring gushing up that we can know, and to have that hope begin to shape what we see.

So we begin to think about that as a way of entering into Advent, think about the hope God brings, that Jesus here is bringing an invitation and a message and beginning to

help the woman see a new thing. I invite us to see that new thing. Another way of saying this is that in Christ we have hope, so let's notice it. Let's notice the hope in this invitation, this encounter, and in the way God encounters us.

Two Sundays ago, I invited us all to think every day about three things we were thankful for, three gratuities. I don't know how many of you have done that, but it's been a wonderful thing to do. Helen and I have done it. Each night we'll say, "What are three things we are grateful for this day." It's a way of just thinking about those different things. I invite you to not only think about the things you're thankful for, but how have you seen the water of life present in your life, or the invitation to it, or a moment of hope, this kind of announcement that Jesus makes to the woman at the well that it is available to us. We have been given hope, so let's notice it.

So at the end of the day sit down, and I would invite you to think about or to write something down about how you saw an invitation, hope, living water today. What kinds of things might those be? One of those for me is that I'm walking through my day and I realize that I just prayed. I thought of somebody or something and I just prayed. Then I realize it and I notice how valuable that was. Noticing helps bring hope alive. Sometimes it's walking through your day and noticing the mercy somebody is showing to someone else, the love and care. Or the moment when somebody is helping out when you know they don't need to help out. It's those moments where we can assume that somebody is just a nice person, and maybe they are. But there's an invitation to recognize that in that goodness God is also present. It's an invitation to see how living water is bubbling up around us in our lives, and to notice that hope Christ offers us.

Jesus invites us to receive the gift of God and to notice it. Let's try to notice it daily at some point, someplace. Where is the moment of hope? Where is the message, the invitation, the encouragement, the love of God that enables us to hope? Amen.

Gracious God, as I think about the woman at the well and how surprised she was to have Jesus not only be there, but to speak to her, to break down the barriers that were between them and to enter into her life in such a surprising way. He surprised her with this invitation that she might know the gift of God—living water—a spring welling up eternally. Lord, help us recognize both the invitation and the way that water springs up in our lives. Let us not walk away thinking that it would be nice not to be thirsty and not really catch the full flavor, the full meaning of what Jesus is saying. Let us open our hearts to your invitation. Let us open our hearts to what you will do in our lives. Let us open our hearts to your promise. Let this hope arise in us, or arise in us again, so that we might live in and through it and know the living water that you give. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.