



## “Thirsting for Heaven”

Sermon on John 4:5-42

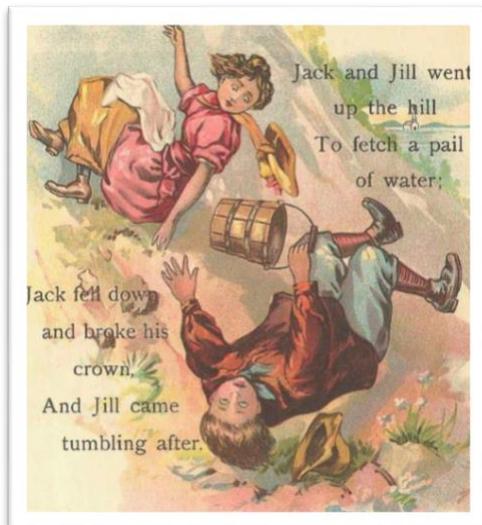
Lent 3-A

March 15, 2020

First United Methodist Church (9:00 am & 11:00 am)

The Rev. J. Curtis Goforth

The nursery rhyme that I remember best from my childhood takes place at a well. Can you guess which one it is?



Isn't it strange how so many of the nursery rhymes and fairy tales that we learned as children are incredibly dark and twisted? I mean, this one about Jack and Jill is about two young folks dying, one right after the other, while doing nothing more than walking up a hill to get some water!

When we were living in England, outside of the city of Bath in Somerset there is a small village called Kilmersdon that I was able to visit. At the top of the hill, by the village school, is a well where the nursery rhyme is said to have gotten its origin.





There is a large plaque on the side of the school by the well with the nursery rhyme and an explanation of what actually happened that inspired it.



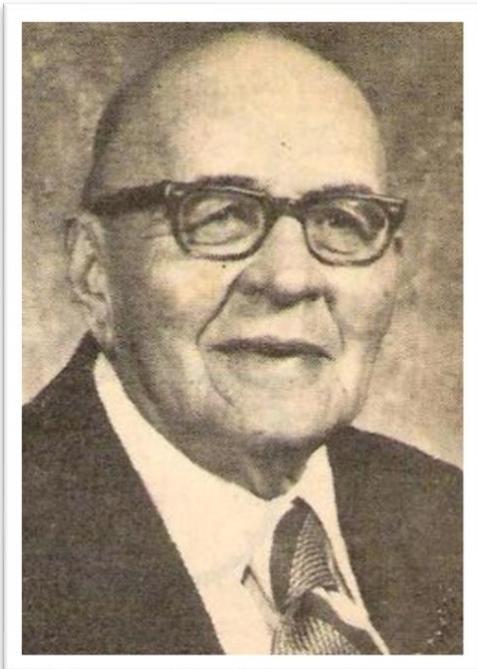
As it happens, near the well and school was a nearby quarry, and Jack was a young man (not a child) who had recently married a young woman named Jill. Jill was at their home near the bottom of the hill where she was pregnant with their first child. Apparently, in a strange accident, a boulder was dislodged which struck Jack on his head as he was coming down the hill, resulting in his death. Grief-stricken, Jill gave birth to their son and died in childbirth shortly after Jack's untimely death. Their son was raised by the villagers of Kilmersdon and there are reportedly people who live in the town to this day with the last name of Gillson (Jill's son). I enjoyed the metalwork on the gates to the school and the adjacent well named for the famous couple.





I suppose that men and women have been meeting at watering holes probably as long as there has been the need for our thirsts to be quenched. Our Gospel lesson this morning is about a man (Jesus) and a woman (unnamed, though I like to call her Jill) who meet at another famous, old well—Jacob’s well. (Jacob apparently had quite a few things: wells, ladders, twelve sons, etc.). And the woman and Jesus have the longest recorded conversation in the New Testament together by that well. This well was already by the time of Jesus over a thousand years old. It would be accessed by a bucket on a rope and the water would be poured into jars that the women would then carry on their shoulders or their heads back to their

homes. This was no easy job, *empty* pottery vessels were heavy enough. So, the time that the women of the village would get water would be in the morning and in the evening, when it wasn’t so terribly hot. But the lady in our gospel lesson was there in the heat of the day. We find out that she was most probably there at that hour of the day because the other women in town looked down on her.



She had been married five times—which is not to say that she had been *divorced* five times, but we get the impression that her life story has been “less than perfect” up to this point. My great-grandfather, his name was Melvin Curtis Goforth, was married five times and just outlived all his wives!

Well, Jesus asks her for a drink of water from the well because he has no bucket. But, then he offers her “living water.” The woman at the well is baffled. Like Nicodemus (from last week’s story), she doesn’t understand what Jesus is telling her.

Remember, there are two levels to the stories in John’s gospel—a literal level, and a more spiritual level. Remember how I mentioned last week that every person in John’s Gospel other than Jesus is stupid/ignorant? Like everyone else in John, the woman at the well only hears the *literal* words Jesus is speaking. “Living water” in the Greek was a phrase used to describe water that came from a spring. She doesn’t understand the *spiritual* level of Jesus’ words. She doesn’t understand that Jesus is actually offering her life itself, not just something to quench her temporary thirst. She asks Jesus to give her this water nonetheless since she hates having to come to the well every day and carry the water back to her home. This woman at the well is just like you and me. Her life isn’t perfect. She is confused by some of Jesus’ words. And she wants her thirst quenched, her physical needs met.



But how often do we settle for a *temporary* fix of our thirst, ignoring the *eternal* fix Jesus offers? All you have to do is drive down the highway and you will be bombarded with billboards for the latest cars, real estate, every type of food imaginable, and several types of energy drinks or frappuccinos or bottled waters to wash it all down with. Yet, in the midst of this advertisement wasteland, Christ stands firm at the well offering us *an eternal alternative* to the temporary fixes we fixate upon.



In the previous century in China there was what became known as “The Cultural Revolution” led by Mao Zedong. Over half a million people were killed, among them many Christians, because they were deemed a threat to the revolution. But despite this persecution, the Church actually *grew* during this time in China.



Bishop K.H. Ting, one of the most prominent Protestant leaders of the time, was asked how the Church in China continued to prosper and even to grow in the face of this persecution, and he responded, “By word of mouth: by one Christian sharing the story with a single friend. That’s how we grew in years of oppression.” That’s how the Church grows now too—by word of mouth—by

one Christian sharing the story with a single friend. The woman at the well went back to her home and told others about this mysterious man she encountered at the local watering hole—and in doing so, *she* became the vessel that carried the living water to others.



We are in the midst of seeing a worldwide pandemic of the COVID-19 corona virus, and as a church we are taking all sorts of precautions to avoid spreading what can be a very deadly disease. Infection rates, left unchecked, typically *double* every seven days. Being as careful as possible is extremely important. But, it is my fear that we care far more about limiting the spread of something *potentially* deadly,

while neglecting the fact that the *certain* life-giving Gospel and love of Christ can be spread in an equally contagious way—and we spend precious little time and resources trying to share it! What if we spent an equal amount of time and energy trying to “infect” the world with the love of Christ as we do trying to avoid spreading COVID-19 infection?



Bottled water is dear. It now costs much more than a gallon of gas. People can’t live without water—and neither can we live without living water. Jesus, the living water, enables us to never thirst again. Jesus, the living water, offers us an eternal fix to the temporary problems of this life—and that’s something worth sharing with others—it, too, is contagious! So please, be

careful *not* to share germs, infectious diseases, and other things that can take away from life with others, but please *be just as diligent* to share the life-giving word of God and love of Jesus with everyone!



And stay away from any wells that require going up a big hill near a quarry. Watering holes can be dangerous places. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.