**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**The Third Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2020**

Like so many young men of this time, he ventured out into the world to *“find his way.”* He was a bright young man . . . extremely bright as a matter of fact and his parents held out high hopes for his future. His father was a government official and an unbeliever. His mother, Monica, was a devout Christian who prayed continually for the conversion of both her husband and her son.

 Because of his gifted intellect, he went away to the city to study at the age of sixteen. As is often the case when children leave home for the first time, they make bad decisions. Although he continued to achieve academically, be began to indulge in the many *“pleasures”* city life had to offer. He found a mistress, had a son out of wedlock at a time when such things weren’t done, and sought meaning in his life by pursuing earthly gratifications.

 As time went on, however, he became dissatisfied with his prodigal lifestyle. An uneasiness took over his life. So, he began to investigate various religious movements and philosophies. He was spiritually thirsty. Everything he tried, though, left his empty. None of these philosophies dealt with the evil he felt inside. None of them dealt with the immoral life he had lived. None of them dealt with his past which continually haunted him.

 One day, while in a garden, he came to a *“crisis of faith.”* He wept out loud as he sat under a fig tree and cried out to God, “*How long? Lord, how long? Will it be tomorrow and always tomorrow? Why does my uncleanliness not end this very moment?”*  Then over the fence the words of a child, who was probably just playing, struck him as if words from heaven. *“Take up and read. Take up and read.”*

 He looked at a manuscript he had been carry and saw a quote from Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 13, verse 13, *“Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”*

 The Holy Spirit, alive and at work in these words, in this simple but unusual way, moved him to seek out Christianity. His mother Monica’s prayers were answered. The year was 386 A.D. He was African. His name was Augustine of Hippo, or as he is more widely known, Saint Augustine. And Augustine would go on to become one of Christianity’s most influential early church fathers and writers. Augustine lived the rest of his life in constant amazement over the grace of God extended to such a sinner as he.

 Given his past, Augustine may have seemed an unlikely candidate for Christianity. He was constantly seeking after women. He had a child out of wedlock. He was a profligate. Who would want to add him to the ranks of the followers of Jesus? Well, Jesus would. You see, Jesus seeks people with a past he does so that he might give to them a future.

 Take for example the Samaritan woman at the well about whom we read in today’s Gospel lesson from John. She is another perfect example of the those who are imperfect that Jesus seeks out. She too had a past that haunted her. Yet, in Jesus, our wellspring of life, the living water from God, she too found forgiveness. And what we learn from her encounter with Jesus is that our gracious Savior does not discriminate against anyone, regardless of sex, race, color, or their past.

 Now, this is a rather lengthy reading and there is too much here to get into every detail, but there are some very important things to point out. For one, John tells us that Jesus, *“had to go”* through Samaria on his way to Galilee. He is isn’t just tell us the route on a map here. Jews hated Samaria and Samaritans and they would never dare set foot in Samaria. Samaritans were considered to be *“half-breeds.”* Samaritans, were kind of a combination of Jew and pagan. And, even though going through Samaria was a more direct route to Galilee, most Jews would actually go out of their way to travel around Samaria as opposed to setting foot in what they considered to be an unclean nation.

 Moreover, John, right away lets us know that there is something peculiar about this woman. It was the sixth hour when she came to the well. That is noon. Now, we may think, *“So, what?” Maybe she slept in or she just liked to get her well water later.”* But in Palestine, no one went to the well in the heat of the day and no one ever went to the well alone. Everyone went in the morning or in the evening when it was cool. More importantly, they went together because it was a social event of sorts. It was a time to chat, catch up on the day’s news and gossip. Kind of like Facebook today without the internet. That this woman came at noon indicates that this woman was trying to avoid the crowds. For reasons that we will learn later, she was an outcast.

 To further demonstrate how peculiar this whole situation was, John tells us that Jesus actually engages in a conversation with this woman. That would have been unthinkable for a Jew in his day. Now, this is hard for us to imagine in our day and age, but this would have been absolutely scandalous. First, Jesus, a Jew, places himself in the middle of Samaria. Second, he speaks to a Samaritan and asks for a drink; a drink that would be considered unclean. Third, not only does he speak to a Samaritan, he speaks to a woman Samaritan who is not just a woman but an outcast from her own people. Jesus is breaking every conventional social mores.

 And if that is not bad enough, Jesus dares to speak to her about theology. Now, to all the ladies here, please don’t get mad at me but in Jesus’ day, even Jewish women were not considered worthy of a theological conversation. In fact, the writings of one Rabbi stated that, *“to educate a woman about the Torah, was like teaching the debauchery or selling them into prostitution.”* As a Jewish man, Jesus could stoop no lower than this. However, as our God, he could step no higher. She was spiritually thirsty and only Jesus could satisfy that thirst.

 During the conversation, Jesus points to himself as what she needs. *“If you only knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”* Jesus wants to realize that he is the gift from God. This is what he wants for all people. He is the living water of God that comes to all sinners as a gift. Those who drink of him,, who trust in him by faith, shall never be spiritually thirsty again. But, before she could drink, this woman needed to see that she was spiritually thirsty in the first place. Jesus need to reveal her sin.

 With one statement, the truth of why she was an outcast comes out in the open. Jesus reveals her past. *“Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband*,” she replied. But Jesus, who sees and knows the hearts of all people, tells her, “*You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”* This woman had a checkered past. She had five husbands and is now living with someone. Her past followed her every day of her life as proved by when she chose to go to the well. In fact, every trip to the well during the heat of the day, every trip she made alone, was a reminder to her of what her passed had done to her.

 The stark reality that Jesus knew about her sin causes her to pursue deeper spiritual issues which ultimately leads her to profess that she believes that the Messiah is coming. Jesus, in reply, tells her, “I am he,” and that is exactly where he wanted her to go. Her past had been laid bare before her and him. All that she had ever done was made know to her and it was made known that Jesus, the Messiah, knew about it. He knew about it and here the marvelous part of our Savior . . . he did not condemn her for it. Instead, he offered himself to her as the answer to her needs. Her race didn’t matter. Her sex did not matter. Her color did not matter, but especially important is that her past didn’t matter.

 My dear friends in Christ, we are all familiar with John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever should believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* But, do you know what John 3:17 states? “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”* Jesus came not to condemn but to save and do you know who he saves? People. He saves people of every shape and variety all of whom have a past. To state the incredibly obvious, he really didn’t have a choice.

 You see, like St. Augustine and like this woman at the well, we all have a past. We have all done things about which we harbor deep and abiding shame. We all have a past which should condemn us and you know what, Jesus already knows. We like to think that the things we have done are our own*, “dirty little secrets.”* But , Jesus already knows everything. No matter how small the transgression or sin, he is already aware of it and you can’t hide it.

 But Jesus came to give people with a past a hope and a future. He came to wash away your past with his blood shed on the cross so that as Isaiah tells us in chapter 43, God will blot out your transgressions and, “*remember your sins no more.*” And when he says he will not remember them what he means is he won’t get even. For the sake of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, God will not seek to make you pay for your past. He has already gotten even with the sins of your past by placing his Son Jesus on the cross. Because of Jesus, as far as he is concerned, you have no past, but only a future. A future with him.

 That is what the good news of the gospel is all about. Jesus came into the world to save it, not condemn it. He came into the world to save you, not condemn you. With the Samaritan woman we see him doing exactly that saving her by erasing her sordid past.

 Offering those with a past forgiveness was his mission, and that is the mission he left with us, his church. My friends, there is a whole world of people out there who have a past which needs erasing. You know many of them personally. They are friends, neighbors, perhaps spouses, brother or sisters. Remember, Christ Jesus is not picky concerning to whom he offers salvation. If you don’t believe me . . .just look around you! We should all marvel as did St. Augustine, over the grace of God which forgives even sinners, such as us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.