Boundary Crossing

March 8, 2026

There's a story about St. Francis of Assisi. In the town of Gubbio, sometime in the thirteenth century, the people were terrified. A wolf had been attacking livestock and terrorizing villagers. People locked their doors, avoided the roads, and whispered about who might be next. Something had to be done. The town decided the wolf had to be hunted down and killed before it destroyed them all.

But then Francis arrived.

Instead of arming himself, instead of rallying the town to fight the beast, Francis walked out beyond the town walls into the wilderness where the wolf roamed. He sought out the very thing everyone else feared.

When he found the wolf, he didn't raise a weapon. He spoke to it. He called it Brother Wolf. He listened. And the wolf—rather than attacking—became still.

Francis returned to the town with the wolf beside him. And something extraordinary happened. The people and the wolf entered into a new relationship. The town agreed to feed the wolf so it would no longer hunt them, and the wolf stopped terrorizing the village.

The wolf wasn't killed. It was befriended.

I've been thinking about that story this week because both of our scripture readings are about places of fear, thirst, and conflict, but even more, about what happens when someone crosses the boundary everyone else avoids.

In Exodus, the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness and they are thirsty. Desperately thirsty. There is no water. Panic spreads. People begin to accuse Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

Their fear turns into blame—that's relatable, right?

Moses cries out to God, afraid the people might even stone him.

God's answer is unexpected. Moses is told to strike the rock, and water pours out in the middle of the desert. The place is named Massah and Meribah, which means testing and quarreling. The name becomes a reminder of what happens when fear and scarcity make us turn on one another.

But notice God's response to all that fear. It's not punishment. It's water, exactly what they needed. God's response to our fear is to offer grace in the middle of thirst.

Now fast forward to the Gospel of John.

Jesus is tired from traveling and sits down by a well in Samaria. That detail might not seem like much, but for a first-century Jewish man, this is already crossing a line. Jews and Samaritans had centuries of hostility between them. They avoided each other. Many Jewish travelers went out of their way to go around Samaria. But Jesus goes straight through. And there he meets a Samaritan woman who has come to draw water. Once again, this is breaking social norms: a Jewish man speaking with a Samaritan woman alone in public.

In asking the woman for a drink, Jesus does something even more surprising than going through Samaria. Think about that moment. The one who will offer "living water" begins by admitting his own thirst.

The woman is stunned. "Why are you—a Jew—asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" It's a fair question, because the walls between them are enormous: ethnicity, religion, gender, and social expectations.

And yet, rather than isolate themselves, Jesus and the woman begin the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in the entire Gospel.

Now, for centuries people have taught that the Samaritan woman must have been morally suspect because the text mentions she had five husbands. But modern scholars today point out something important: in the ancient world women rarely controlled their marital fate. Divorce, death, abandonment—any number of circumstances could have produced that history, and the fact that Jesus never calls her a sinner, which he does with others elsewhere, tells us that the fact that she's had five husbands is not something Jesus takes issue with. Point blank, he never tells her to repent. Instead, he treats her like a theologian. She asks real questions about worship, about God, about where truth is found, Jesus answers them seriously, and by the end of the conversation, she becomes the first evangelist in John's Gospel. She leaves her water jar, runs back to town, and tells everyone, "Come and see a man who told me everything I've ever done!" What's more, the text says many people believed because of her testimony. In the Orthodox tradition, she's even called "equal to the apostles."

There's a cartoonist I follow named David Hayward, who draws under the name The Naked Pastor. This week he created a cartoon that stuck with me. On one side was the word past and on the other side was the word future. Above the word "past" was a little church building being dragged across the page pulled by two sheep, one with rainbow-colored wool and the other with the baby blue, pink, and white stripes of the transgender pride flag. The caption said, "It's interesting that it is almost always marginalized people who cause the church to reexamine itself, repent, and transform in order to fulfill its mission of love and inclusion."

When I saw the cartoon, I thought, "That's exactly what's happening at the well in Samaria." Because in John's Gospel, the conversation about living water, the deep theological conversation about worship in spirit and truth, doesn't happen with Nicodemus the powerful religious leader from chapter three who we read about last week. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, quietly, cautiously. But the Samaritan woman? She meets Jesus in broad daylight. She asks questions. She debates theology. She becomes the one who brings the good news to her entire community. The outsider becomes the messenger.

And maybe that shouldn't surprise us. Because God has always worked this way. The thirsty Israelites in the wilderness teach us about dependence on grace. The Samaritan woman teaches us about living water. The people on the margins keep pulling the church toward its future.

But there's another layer to all of this. Remember the wolf in Gubbio? The townspeople saw a monster. Francis saw something else—a creature driven by hunger and fear. So instead of fighting the wolf, he tried something radical. He listened…and that changed everything.

I wonder if something similar is happening in the story at the well. Because when Jesus sits down there, he doesn't treat the Samaritan woman as an enemy, or a problem, or a scandal waiting to happen. He treats her as a conversation partner. He listens to her questions. He trusts her voice. And because he does, she becomes the one who brings living water to her town.

There's a line in a prayer by Shannon Evans that says: "For so long women have been told not to take up too much space—not with their bodies, not with their voices, not with their desires." But at the well in Samaria, Jesus makes space. Space for questions. Space for theology. Space for a voice that others might have dismissed. And when that happens, transformation spreads outward.

There's an NPR campaign running right now that says something similar. It says: "When a river is drying up, the first to notice are the people who live beside it. When a school loses teachers, the first to ask why is a parent. Curiosity is core to being human. People notice. People question."

That's exactly what the Samaritan woman does. She notices. She questions. And then she invites others to come and see.

So maybe the invitation of Lent is something like this: To cross the boundaries we've been taught to avoid. To listen to voices we've been told not to trust. To recognize that the Spirit is likely to already be moving in places we assumed were outside the circle. Because when Jesus meets people at the well, when living water begins to flow, it never stays contained. It spills out into whole communities. It transforms towns. And a good part of the time, the people carrying that living water are the ones the world has pushed to the margins.

Which brings us back to that story of St. Francis and the wolf.

Imagine that moment again. The villagers are gathered outside the gates of Gubbio. They're expecting Francis to return with news that the wolf has been killed. Instead, they see something else. Francis, walking slowly down the road, and beside him is… the wolf. Not attacking. Not snarling. Walking calmly at his side. The very thing they feared most has become part of the community.

The peace that follows doesn't come from destroying the wolf. It comes from relationship. From listening. From recognizing the hunger underneath the fear.

I think something like that is happening at the well in Samaria. The disciples return, expecting to find Jesus keeping the usual boundaries. Instead, they find him deep in conversation with someone they've been taught to other, to shame, to exile. By the time the story ends, that woman has become the bridge between Jesus and an entire town.

The outsider becomes the messenger. The one who was supposed to be the enemy becomes the voice that brings others to living water.

And maybe that's the image we carry with us into this week: A well in the middle of a hot afternoon. Two strangers sitting at the edge of it. Crossing every boundary their world has built. Talking. Listening. Asking questions. Becoming people to one another.

And somewhere in that conversation, the living water of God begins to flow. Flowing through a woman who was never supposed to preach. Flowing into a town that was never supposed to belong. Flowing into a world still thirsty for grace.

Friends, the good news is this: Even in the places we are taught to avoid…indeed, especially in those places, the living water is flowing. And if we have the courage to cross the boundaries, to listen deeply, to make space for voices the world tells us to ignore, we might just discover that the Spirit is already there ahead of us, turning strangers into neighbors, enemies into companions, and thirsty communities into springs of living water.

May the grace of Christ make it so. Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Exodus 17:1–7; John 4:5–42
March 8, 2026