

Sunday January 3rd 2021, the second Sunday of Christmas

Readings

Psalm 147

¹ Praise the Lord.^[a]

How good it is to sing praises to our God,
how pleasant and fitting to praise him!

² The Lord builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the exiles of Israel.

³ He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.

⁴ He determines the number of the stars
and calls them each by name.

⁵ Great is our Lord and mighty in power;
his understanding has no limit.

⁶ The Lord sustains the humble
but casts the wicked to the ground.

⁷ Sing to the Lord with grateful praise;
make music to our God on the harp.

⁸ He covers the sky with clouds;
he supplies the earth with rain
and makes grass grow on the hills.

⁹ He provides food for the cattle
and for the young ravens when they call.

¹⁰ His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;

¹¹ the Lord delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.

¹² Extol the Lord, Jerusalem;
praise your God, Zion.

¹³ He strengthens the bars of your gates
and blesses your people within you.

¹⁴ He grants peace to your borders
and satisfies you with the finest of wheat.

¹⁵ He sends his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
¹⁶ He spreads the snow like wool
and scatters the frost like ashes.
¹⁷ He hurls down his hail like pebbles.
Who can withstand his icy blast?
¹⁸ He sends his word and melts them;
he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow.

¹⁹ He has revealed his word to Jacob,
his laws and decrees to Israel.
²⁰ He has done this for no other nation;
they do not know his laws.^[b]

Praise the Lord.

Ephesians 1: 3-14

Praise for Spiritual Blessings in Christ

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he^[b] predestined us for adoption to sonship^[c] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he^[d] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen,^[e] having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

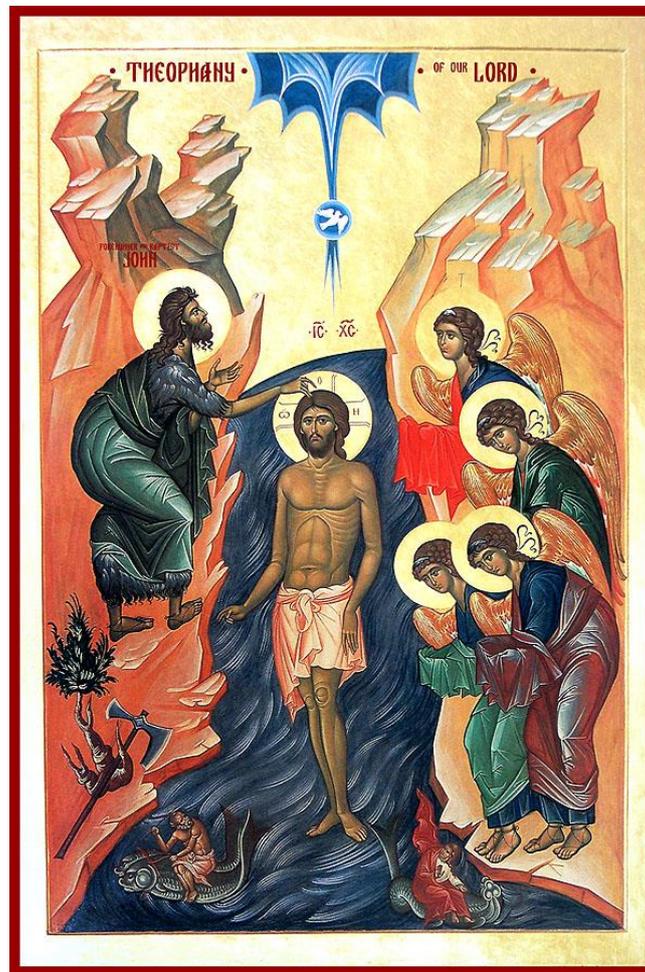
Reflection

There was a choice this morning of biblical events we could consider: the arrival of the Magi and the Baptism of Christ. We are going to look at the latter to see what it might mean for us at the start of 2021.

Firstly, we are going to consider an icon portraying Christ's baptism and then read a passage from a book called [The Day I met Jesus written by Frank Viola and Mary Demuth](#) which paints a different perspective of the story in John chapter 4 when Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well. It is quite a long passage but well worth taking the time to read and reflect on.

The Baptism of Christ

This is an icon of the Baptism of Christ. There is quite a lot going on. Let's think about it for a few moments.



- Let's orient ourselves first: who is in the painting?
- What are they doing?
- Think about baptism. What does it mean to you?
- Does this picture change your view of Baptism? How?

I wonder what the people on the right are thinking and feeling. They are there at a unique time for creation, with Jesus right there in front of them, being baptised with Him. I think they would feel renewed, re-energised, ready to live fuller lives, whatever was thrown at them.

The passage from Ephesians describes the new life God has given us in Christ. Paul praises God for giving us every spiritual blessing. His voice is full of passion, energy – he is keen for others to know that they can be renewed too.

This is a time of year when we often think about renewal. What will our New Year's resolutions be? How long we might keep them up for?

For many of us, the traumatic year we've just experienced, will have tested our faith. And there are still some difficult months to come. At this challenging juncture with hope of a vaccine on the horizon, but not here yet - what if we think about renewing our relationship with Christ? What might that look like? What strength and peace might we find?

What might this mean for us in 2021?

To help us think about these questions, I want to share an extract from a book called [The Day I met Jesus written by Frank Viola and Mary Demuth](#). It imagines how various women in the gospels may have encountered Jesus. This passage is about the woman at the well from John chapter 4:1-42. The other re-imaginings of gospel passages in this book are uplifting too.

Diary of a Desperate Samaritan Woman

I have never wanted to write my story because no happy ending existed. Besides, who would want to read my woeful words, and why? Instead, my life played like Job's tragedy without his restoration, tied with a twisted thread of betrayal. Always, always, I would think on the years past, saddened by the tangle of them, thinking God had forgotten my life, my dreams. My stomach kept itself in knots while people pointed and wagged their heads. But now. Oh, glorious, grace-awakening now! I write these words with wild expectation, with sudden joy, because a man told my story to me straight, and, with that, changed its ending forever. But before I write of my parched soul now quenched, I must take you back to the moment I withered.

There had been an old era when water meant life to me. My first husband Hezron had met me by Jacob's well in those carefree halcyon days, the well that I ventured to today. He playfully called it his well, though we both knew the real origin. His words still sang through me: "You are more spectacular than the sunrise." I blushed under such words and said nothing in response. Could he really find me so attractive? His eyes affirmed so. I believed, like a naive girl, that he spoke truth. I blossomed in the light of it. "And our children," he said with the same affection, "Will carry your beauty and my wit." With that, he winked. I dared to whisper, "I hope so," but the dry wind carried my words. Like those around us, parents arranged our marriage. But I had no parents, no ketubah to give his family. "Beautiful but moneyless," he told me. But when he said it, his eyes sparkled, and his smile dimpled. "You are my ketubah, my sweet dowry promise," he said then, holding my face in his hands. I drank in Hezron's words like the thirstiest girl in Samaria. With a mother and father sleeping long in their graves on the hillside, I lived under the

shadow of an angry aunt. Hezron's love gave me hope and a means to escape her servitude. We secreted away to marry, despite the protests of others. Once we settled into our home, people began to accept us. Huron's love lasted four months. Writing it now still brings When my belly did not swell with child, his face soured and his brow After six months, his voice harshened. "What kind of womb refuses my gift?" His questions were not meant as an invitation to conversation. They became angry declarations of my unworthiness. With as much love as he first had, sacrificing his reputation to be with me, he now hated me with the same vigour. He could not even look my way. He would not. But he would have me nonetheless. Nine months passed since We married, and Hezron snapped like a dry twig underfoot. He lifted his hand, threatened to hit me, only to recoil, then cry, then beg me to forgive him for such threats. He bounced between madman and saint. I learned to read each mood, either cowering or welcoming him. Always seducing him to bed in hopes of winning his affection through the gift of a baby.

As the years marched by, I picked up small jobs, gathering sticks, cooking for women whose bellies produced babies aplenty. I lived as a ghost with dreams, watching others live my hope of family, but never participating. "Worthless" and "barren" embodied who I became. I lived my life with head down, empty eyes never meeting a soul. The small jobs dried up and forced me to move to a nearby village. I naively hoped that a fresh start would mean a new life. So, I married again, hoping to quell the pain deep inside of me. I walked this earth to simply be beholden to a man—however he saw fit. When my womb remained empty, my second husband grabbed me by the hair and threw me into the streets. No one wants a barren woman, no matter how much she gives. This lesson pierced my soul like a flint knife. Two more husbands became temporary. They cycled into my life, then out again as each one discovered my secret. longed to distance myself from the memory of Hezron, the well, the one small moment I felt love.

Judah changed everything. He found me weeping, bereft of joy, as I picked up firewood on the outskirts of civilization. My hands dusty, my eyes wet, I only saw two sandaled feet as I knelt on the earth, pulling a large branch from scrub. "Why is a lovely woman like you crawling so close to the ground ? Solomon's palace would not suffice such a face. He shielded his eyes from the sun, then coughed. I looked at him, tall as timber. Shook my head. "I am making my way. Gathering wood is what I do." "I am Judah." He extended his hand to me and pulled me to my feet. Such easy effort. I wiped my hands on my tunic. "And I am dusty." We walked back to the village that evening as the sun faded to pink and blue, then deep purple. I told him my story, and he told me his. Life had broken him—his wife taking her last breath as she pushed a stillborn into this cruel world.

Later, as he asked to marry me, I put my hand up as if to halt him. I am barren. I can give you no children. I have told this to you already." "I want a wife," Judah said, "not a mother." We married quietly and commenced our companioned life together, measured in happy days, conversation, and hushed dreams. Except that God severed Judah's dreams on this earth. The cough I had noticed in our brief courtship monstered into blood-soaked cloths lifted to dry lips. I loved him all those one hundred and eighteen days, loved him like my own life. And when he bled his last breath, all my vitality drained from me. I haunted the hills—unawake and dead of heart. I considered exiling myself to Palestine, in the land of the Jews. I had heard rumours of a man who

welcomed outcasts, who was kind to widows, who fed thousands. Perhaps He would dignify me. But my brief foray to that land only ended in slanderous rants and racial epithets. Such hatred compelled me back to my people. In all, five Samaritan husbands had me. Four husbands used my body, then dismissed me. Only one loved me, but my happiness died with him. I shook my fist at the Almighty, daring Him to take my life and be over with it. Why should I remain here on this earth? Without a child, I had no legacy, no hope, no reason to live. There existed none to carry on my traits or my lineage or my sorry story. What beckoned me back to Sychar where I write my tale? One enticing man and the graves of my parents. When this new man told me where he lived, I remembered the comfort I used to feel visiting my parents on the hillside. He used all of Huron's words—words like beautiful, love, and want. He seduced me, only to recoil against me in the aftermath. "You are so very safe," he said. "What do you mean?" I said as I rose up from his sleeping mat, propping my chin on my shaking hand. The shame inside of me burned. Never before had I slept with a man who was not my husband. Half of me worried God would strike me dead; the other half did not care if He did. My life mirrored my womb. "I am married," he said. I did not think my heart could break any more, but with those words it shattered into dread. "But you are useful to me. You are alone, no?" "Yes, I am alone." Four more words—a declaration of my life. "And you need food?" He traced his rough hand over the diminishing curve of my hip where the bone protruded. "Yes." But what I wanted to say was, "I need more than food. More than water. More than shelter." "You will be my worker," he said. "Live within my house. Take care of my children. Do the work so my wife will not have to labour. And then in the evening" I knew what he meant. I did not argue with myself whether this would be good or bad. It was simply my lot. To be used. To live for the sake of another, losing myself, my dreams, and my desires completely. A barren widowed woman could hope for no more. This morning, I tried to shake the dark memories from my head. They played like cautionary tales during nightmares, only to retell themselves in the light of day. With those memories in mind, I grabbed the empty vessel and made the hot, dusty trek to Hezron's terrible well—the place where betrayal entered my life. I walked with the shame of my past and the guilt of my present—like a heavy camel's skin pressed on sweaty shoulders during the heat of day. I could not remove the weight. I could not escape it. My body memorized the routine: Walk the dusty road, head down, drop the earthen vessel into the well's deep throat, and lug and lurch its contents home—only to perform the same duty again and again, and again. All under the watchful stare of the unrelenting sun. I trudged there, alone at the noon hour, as was my custom. I dared not draw water in the morning like the other women—to avoid their snickers and stares. They gossiped my current story to death. Every nuance. Even the little children knew; they held up five fingers as reminder of my husbands. Old women shook their heads at me when I walked the town. Men leered. I have heard it said that a barren woman must always send herself to get water because she has no children to bear the weight of labor. Halfway to the well, I wondered again (was it the hundredth time?), why am I here in Samaria? What is the reason God placed me on this sullen earth? Does He create people simply to be used and abused? Has His favor shone only on the Jews? Only on the strong? Only on men? Only on women whose wombs produced babies? He certainly did not shine upon me, even as the sun relentlessly accosted me on my long, lonely walk. I did not know then what I shout with joy now: God loves the weak. When I arrived, the usually vacant well had a visitor. A man, sitting near the well's mouth. No horse or camel accompanied Him, so I wondered if He had traveled on foot by

Himself. I sighed. His silhouette brought me back to Hezron's dancing eyes and the flutter of my heart in this very spot. Days long stolen. With the sun-washed hillside around Him and the noonday sun shining on the top of His head, He sat perfectly still, completely at peace, it seemed. He did not stand when I entered the circle of the well. Instead, He seemed like a fixture there, a statue that had always been erected. I rubbed my eyes. He lingered there, still quiet under a treeless sky, His clothes rumpled from days upon days of travel, it seemed. As I neared the man, His garments revealed that He was a Jew. But Jews did not journey alone through Samaria. He sat quietly there like He waited for someone. He looked up, finally, His eyes tired. And yet—more alive than any man's eyes I had seen. I thought to myself, can eyes dance? Can they smile? Sing? Because this man's eyes performed all three while welcoming me to this desolate spot of earth. I said nothing to Him, but He held my gaze. A bead of sweat meandered down His face, but He did not wipe it away. The day mustered to swelter us both. I dropped my dipper into the deep well. As I drew near, He turned toward me and looked deeply into my eyes. I had a strange feeling that He knew me. He smiled confidently, paused, cleared His throat, and reached out His hand. "Would you please give Me a drink?" His voice sounded parched, nearly dried up. But it was His words that stunned me to silence. What kind of holy man dared to talk to me in public? But not just any man—a Jew, as His accent gave his lineage away. A Jewish man talking to me? Wanting only water and nothing more? Jews had treated my people like dogs, as utter outcasts to their exclusivity on the Almighty. And here this tired man stooped to ask me for a drink. I looked around, wondering if this were a trap. I heard rumours of Jewish holy men entrapping women like me in compromising situations. I swallowed hard, my tongue thick in my mouth, but I could not hold back my curiosity. "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan. How can you ask me for a drink?" What I really thought: You Jews will not even talk to Samaritans. Unless perhaps you want something from us. But something about this man prevented those words from leaving my mouth. I saw kindness in His eyes. And I heard compassion in the timbre of His voice, something so compelling and alien that I could not let my sarcasm out. "If you knew God's gift and who I am," He said, "you would be asking Me for living water and I would give it to you." A rather arrogant thing to say, seeing that He had brought nothing to draw water. "Sir," I said, "this well is over one hundred feet deep, and You have no wooden dipper and no flaxen cord. Where are You going to get this living water?" I wanted Him to know I considered the patriarch Jacob my father just as the Jews claim him to be. I have always wanted to tell a Jew that we Samaritans are not half-breeds like they say we are, so I asked, "Are You greater than our father Jacob who dug this well and drank from it?" As I said those words, I remembered the face of Hezron. For the first time in twelve years, I recalled the kindness he once had. Coupled with the kindness of this man, I wondered if perhaps He would love me. He gestured toward the well. "If you keep coming to this well, you will always thirst, but if you drink the water I offer you, you will never thirst again. In fact, the water that I give will flow from within you forever." I did not understand what He said—how can water flow from within a person? Water came from the earth, simple as that. But He spoke so confidently, with a spark of love radiating from His eyes, and I felt a sense of care and acceptance coming from Him that I had experienced only from dear, dear Judah. But life had hardened my heart like clay earth, wholly parched, drained of all its life blood, baked impenetrable by hatred and rejection. I wanted this man's magic water for some temporary relief. I sighed, then looked upon His face. "Sir, give me this water so that I will not get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." Oh, how I meant those words. And for a sacred

second, I believed this man would give me exactly what I wanted. "Go, call your husband and come back." The wind inside me, the pneuma, exhaled into the hot, thick air. So, there was a special trick to receive such a blessing? I had to have a husband. Little in my life made sense. He sliced open the biggest wound in my heart with His words. I dropped my head and whispered, "I have no husband." Silence.

I waited for His judgment and withdrawal. He would abandon me as all the others had. Or sneer. Or expose me. But strangely, He did not move. So utterly peaceful like a calmed sea. He simply drew my attention in a way that wooed me. He smiled and said, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. So, what you have just said is quite true." I froze. How could He possibly know that? And why would He so brazenly say these things out loud? The shame inside me warmed my face, blushing my expression. I said nothing, trying to understand how this man knew my story. I realized that the Jews may be right, and prophets exist. Was He a holy prophet, yet one with heart? After all, He offered me living water all the while knowing my story. Would He recoil and shift to angry judgment, grab my hair at the scalp and throw me to the ground? Would He use me for His pleasure and gain? Kindness played no role in my life. Anyone acting kind only wanted something from me. Instead of wallowing in that inevitability with this man, I changed the topic of conversation. "We Samaritans worship on Mount Gerizim and you Jews worship on Mount Zion. Which one of us is correct?" "Miss," He said, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews." The rebuke was kind, but He spoke with authority. Nevertheless, I thought, always the Jews. Always their special place in God's heart. Never Samaritans. Perhaps this is why my story is sad? I belonged to an unfavoured race? These thoughts stirred me, but I did not voice them. I sat down near the well to hear the rest of His words. He continued, holding my eyes with His. "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks." When He said seeks, my insides harkened, pregnant with love. Could it be—could it really be that God seeks me to be His worshiper? A five-time-married Samaritan now sleeping with another woman's husband? Why would He notice me? But the man's demeanour toward me seemed to indicate the irresistible truth: I am sought. "God is spirit." He pointed skyward and smiled. "And His worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." We Samaritans do not believe in prophets after Moses. Except for the one prophet who we were all waiting for. A prophet like Moses himself. The Jews call Him the Messiah. We call Him Taheb, the Restorer. "When the Messiah comes," I told Him, "He will explain all of these deep things to us." "I am the Messiah." Could it be? The stirring inside me believed it, but to be honest, fear prevented me from rejoicing in this revelation. Those four words strung together would change my story forever. The Restorer of the world revealed His identity to me. At that moment, voices sounded nearby. The man's companions arrived—His disciples, I surmised. They shot judgment my way, and I could feel the words they did not voice. Why were you talking to a Samaritan? And a woman no less? Still drunk from His Taheb declaration, I made a choice to shrug off their quiet accusations. In that moment, He satiated my lifelong thirst—as if clear cool water drenched me refreshed in the heat of day. It baptized my head, rushed down my throat, settled in my stomach, and permeated my thirsty heart. Anchored to the dusty earth, I knew this

longed- for truth: I am loved. So very, utterly noticed. Picked. Wanted. Despite my story. Or maybe because of it? I am not sure. But one thing I am assured of is this: God saw fit to notice me, to make Himself known to me quietly at the place of my betrayal and shame. Living Water met me at high noon. I heard the Messiah laugh as He watched this transformation unfold in me. While evil had taken a lifetime to destroy me, this man took mere moments to re-story me. His eyes laughed (and danced and sang). We shared a knowing look, as if He saw the tragedy of my story in its entirety and resurrected it to new purpose—and then He said, "Dare to live your life well." What tragedy happened in the doldrums of my past has now become a wellspring of grace, covering all the shame, sin, and a lifetime of accumulated regret. Under the hot sun, I drank in this grace of a new life, gulped it deep, clasping my hands to my chest because I felt my heart would overflow its borders and spill out onto the crowd. One man motioned to the Messiah, then called Him Jesus. Jesus. Such a common name for a man bent on blessing us all. And in that moment, I knew this sweet gift of living water was not merely meant for me, but for all of Sychar. I found my feet, and with eyes wide open, I ran home to Sychar, my heart full of living, breathing, enlivening water. Halfway there, I realized I had left my container at the well, but I spared no extra running to retrieve it. Telling others about Living Water made a simple water vessel unimportant. I dared to speak to the elders of Sychar about Jesus, the Taheb, the Restorer, the Messiah. I met the looks of gossipy women and, instead, danced in their presence. I grasped the hands of children holding up five fingers, and I laughed. With tears wetting my face and joy permeating my soul, I entreated them, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could this man be the Restorer, the Messiah!? He is at the well of Jacob. Come and see!" One man said, "Is this the woman who never speaks to us? What could have happened to her? Let us go and see." It must have been my sheer excitement, or perhaps the weight of the word "Messiah," but once I sang it out loud, "Come, come and see," many followed me to meet Jesus at the well. Did they follow because they were puzzled by my transformation, or were they just curious? Jesus stood on the hill near the well and watched us all approach. Gesturing to the crowd, He said, "Lift up your eyes and look upon the fields. They are white and ready to harvest." One of the Sychar elders approached Him. He bowed slightly. "This woman has given witness that You know everything about her." He pointed to me. "Something has indeed happened to her. We wish to hear more of Your words." The Messiah seemed to radiate. After hearing Jesus speak, the elders invited Him to dine tonight in Sychar. He graciously accepted. This evening Samaritans and a Jew will break bread together. We will share stories of lament and renewal and hope and the kingdom of God for all people—even Samaritans with painful pasts. No man has ever spoken words like this man. His words feed life; they behold hope; they gush truth. It is hard for me to believe what has taken place today. My story is no longer a rejection tale to mourn, but a beautiful epic to hope for. God has given me another chance.

Prayer

May God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit help us to pause and see afresh the beautiful life we can hope for. God gives us all another chance. **Amen**