

We're at the start of a long story.

The coronavirus pandemic will disrupt life for much longer than anyone wants, which is to say, more than a few hours.

People will die and families will grieve, many with no one around them.

Inconveniences and annoyances will mount, and more significantly, so will dangers for those on the edges of society and stability.

The economic impact and implications will radiate for years.

The logistical and emotional and spiritual complications are exponential.

There is so much more to this new reality than any of us can wrap our minds around yet.

For now, we suspend life as we assume it and watch and pray and worry and hope and care for one another from an awkward distance and do our best.

Heeding the advice of the experts, we are learning to practice social distancing.

But we still need basics, like water.

Which is why the social distancing professional goes to the well at noon.

The Samaritan woman has more ex-husbands than friends.

It's a long story.

She goes to the well at noon to avoid the morning crowd, and all the gossip and judgment that comes with it.

She waits for the heat of the day, when no one else wants to be out.

She wouldn't go at all, but she still needs basics, like water, so she waits till 3am to go to the grocery store.

Hopefully, no one else will be there.

She has, over time, mastered the daily practice of social distancing in order to survive.

When and where no one else shows up, God does.

To her astonishment, there is another customer at her watering hole, a single Jewish man.

This is the start of a long story.

Wells are where the family of Jacob meet their spouses.

But Jews practice extreme social distancing from Samaritans – most don't even enter the territory, much less sit down at a well.

They will get infected; they will become, physically and spiritually, "unclean."

They will not be able to worship God; they will have to self quarantine and purify themselves through a long process for an extended period of time.

So what is this single Jewish man doing, asking this Samaritan woman for a drink when both of them are alone?

(His disciples had gone into town to buy toilet paper.)

It's highly unusual, weird, suspicious, even scandalous.

It's painfully, wonderfully awkward.

And it's a long story.

We have the advantage, and also the disadvantage, of knowing how it ends.

Those of us at the front end of this long coronavirus story have no assurances about how it will all turn out.

We hope for the best, prepare for the worst, and push forward the best we can.

So we can sympathize with this Samaritan woman doing the same thing.

She has learned the hard way to be cautious, even defensive with Jewish men, but it's not like avoiding men comes naturally to her, so she's caught in the familiar push-pull of trust and fear.

Rudolf Otto famously defined "the holy" as being both terrifying and attractive, a mystery that pushes us away and pulls us in at the same time.

This stranger and his talk of living water is holy.

It is too strong to accept, and it is too strong to resist, though she tries valiantly.

He knows too much, sees her far too well, yet he doesn't run away.

He breaks through her social and spiritual distancing with relentless presence.

When he speaks of living water, something begins to bubble inside her.

When he speaks of spirit and truth, she can see it in his eyes.

When he speaks of God, she can feel it in her bones.

Her isolated life has been interrupted, invaded, invigorated.

Jesus breaks and bridges the social distance: between male and female, between Jew and Samaritan, between clean and unclean, between human and heaven.

After a long and fascinating conversation, the disciples return to Jesus speechless.

And she returns to town and talks to everyone.

*Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!*, she says.

Stop and think about that.

Way back at the start of this long story, this woman came to the well at noon to avoid these very people who know far too much about her history with men already.

Now she breathlessly invites them to *come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done*.

Pious pastors might call this effective evangelism.

I think it's *The Springer Show*.

We're both right.

Curiosity turns into trust.

A conversation with the woman everyone talks about but no one talks with turns into the miracle of her introducing them all to *the Savior of the world*.

The holy something bubbling inside her that he calls living water goes viral and heals the entire town, flowing through the one person cut off from everyone else.

Salvation is a virus that spreads in ways we cannot comprehend or control.

Grace runs rampant and overcomes all our careful safeguards against it.

We cannot predict when or where or how this irresistible Christ will show up, infecting the world with contagious life and hope.

We do know that he finds and stays with those of us who have no one else.

And we also know that something is going to kill us all, and whenever we die, whenever we reach that lonely high noon where we don't want to go, Christ will be there awaiting us.

And thanks to him, even death will be just the start of a long story.