

Lent III Year A 2026

All of us, at one time or another, experience conversion... on rare occasions the experience may be dramatic, but most often it is mundane. In truth, life itself is an unending process of conversion, a constant turning toward the Truth; a breaking out of our tenuous self-sufficiency, our unthinking habits. We have a choice in the matter. The gospel scribes call it *metanoia*, repentance, a turning toward imaginative reasonableness. The word *metanoia* actually means “reasoning beyond;” thinking outside the proverbial box; taking an imaginative look beyond our habitual context; suspending our illusions, opening ourselves to possibility. Often, we resist such moments of transformation. It demands work, and intentionality, and no small measure of courage; but sooner or later it will find us, sometimes gently; sometimes, not so much. Crisis is defined as a crucial and decisive turning point. Life is a maturing process of turning points. *Metanoia*.

Most, if not all of my conversion experiences, I have apprehended in hindsight. I suppose I didn't have the good sense to recognize them as they were taking place. One such experience happened in seminary. My class, some twenty of us, travelled to the U.S. Mexican border to, as the syllabus described it... to experience the “border reality.” We went to Matamoros, just across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas. The contrast between an American, first-world city, and a Mexican border town, in which poverty was front and center, was shocking, unnerving. In particular, we were there to see the maquiladoras... which are American factories lined up like cordwood along the Mexican side of the border. They are there because of the cheap labor, and little or no environmental regulation. They

pay their workers just pennies on the dollar. Workers come from the far interiors of the country for menial employment and a menial life. The majority of the population of Matamoros consists of such laborers who live in shanties pieced together with scrap, without electricity or running water. The factories dump their waste into the river. Birth defects in Matamoros are some fifty times higher than they are in Brownsville, just a few miles away in another world. Most, if not all of the money generated by these factories, of course, goes to the profits of big American corporations. Amid the squalor, I asked, what does all this have to do with theology? What does this have to do with me? ...my anxiety spiking. I was fearful that our rickety bus wouldn't start, stranding us in this squalor... I was so glad to leave. The Days Inn in Brownsville felt like luxury, though my dreams that night were fitful and troubling. I began to realize what a sheltered, privileged life I lived. Perhaps, I thought, my faith was much more than just about me.

Our reading today in John's Gospel is a story about conversion. A coming face to face with the truth. It is a conversion experience for the Samaritan woman, a conversion experience for Jesus, but I think, most of all, it is a conversion experience for the writer of this gospel; perhaps he is observing a conversion of his community. After all, the whole of John's Gospel is the writer's point of view, the writer's theological and philosophical agenda. The Gospel of John begins as a philosophical treatise on the person of Jesus. Who he is. What he means. Jesus is the Logos, the word and the embodied Wisdom of God. He is the Platonic reality of God among us... that is to say, he is a form of earth that reflects the form of heaven... the Word made flesh. Jesus the human, a reflection of God the divine. The writer

then in metaphorical reverie describes what Jesus is like. He is the gate into a way of life; he is bread from heaven, nurture for the soul; he is wine, heavenly and mind-altering drink; he is shepherd tending the beloved flock of God... and here in our reading today, he is living water... the most basic rudiment of life. it's all such heady stuff.

But in this encounter at Jacob's well, the longest conversation Jesus has in the New Testament, there is a shift from academic, philosophical speculations to a practical representation and understanding as to the actual ministry and purpose of those who follow Jesus. Whoever this person Jesus is, I imagine the writer musing, the one thing he brings, that he has seen and experienced in the life of his own community, is freedom. The writer remembers the story of Jesus's encounter with a Samaritan woman... I'm reasonably sure he's read the Synoptic accounts... the Samaritans were mortal enemies of the Judeans; they are the ethnic half-breads from the borderlands between Juda and Israel to the north. They would be considered unclean, untouchable. And certainly it was taboo for a man to speak with a woman in public, least of all a Samaritan one. Jesus discerns that she has had five husbands. I used to read this as Jesus calling the woman out for her sexual indiscretions; Jesus judging her behavior... but that is not the case. And that understanding is crucial in understanding this passage. Women had no choice in the matter of having a husband, or many husbands. The social code prescribed who a woman would marry. If her first husband died, then his brother, if unmarried, would take her as a wife... or a cousin, and so on. In short, a woman was treated as property of or a slave to the patriarchy. So Jesus is not calling her out, making a moral judgement. He is recognizing her oppressive lot in life. He is calling

out the social system. It is a moment of profound empathy. Included in her lot, also, is the responsibility for bringing water to her family and community, not unlike women in our own day in the underdeveloped world who every day travel miles to bring water to their families and villages. The writer, by way of this literary encounter, is saying that the word of God is dignity and freedom; that the living water God so freely gives us are the waters of freedom from the structural oppression of the powers that be... that is to say, patriarchy. Why don't the men come for the water, Jesus might have asked? Whereas the writer of John is a cosmopolitan, mainstream academic, hence this Gospel's inclusion in the biblical canon, he is also being decidedly and profoundly counter-cultural. At the heart of the Jesus movement was the invitation to join a community of equals. I believe this is a story that explains the allure of early Christianity. It was about freedom from cultural and social oppression, and therefore it was about living a life of dignity and well-being, unfettered from the institutional mindset of the culture; unfettered from the structures of society corrupted by self-interest... Salvation in short. The writer is converted to a faith, not so much about esoteric knowledge but to a faith based on practice informed by his own experience. In other words we are hearing first hand a witness to the Good News, a vision of a redemptive way of life. The writer himself is exulting in freedom; and that his faith may have greater responsibility than himself.

There is nothing more empowering than a sense of dignity; dignity being the absence of shame... we under-rate the destruction shame inflicts on our world and the violence it causes. There is nothing more powerful than a sense dignity, a sense of worth, and the

gratitude that comes with it. Such a predisposition brings health and peace of mind, literally. This Good news of the Jesus Movement, that is, inclusion and embrace, brings abundant life. “For God so Loved the world that he gave his beloved Son to the end that all who believe in him will have eternal life.” Eternal Life isn’t about heaven. Eternal life means living into the abundance of our full humanity. That is our mission and ministry good people... to be bearers of eternal life to our neighbor who is deprived it by the sinful structures of our world.

My experience at the border gave me the insight, a vision, perhaps, into what the structures of greed and self-interest can do to people... I saw what God’s dream of a peaceable realm is up against. Because of corrupt power, people all over the world, are consigned to a death worse than death itself. “Death in life,” T.S. Eliot calls it. Shame and abuse eviscerate one’s very humanity.... We are given life that we may give life. That means we are in the business of setting the captives of our world free, so that they may live. That is why I say, most every Sunday that our faith is a public faith. Our faith is to be converted to the public good. The vision we share must take on flesh and blood, as it were.... And who are our neighbors who suffer this proverbial death in life? The immigrant being hunted on our streets. The several thousand homeless public-school children in our city; our Black brothers and sisters who live in neighborhoods without sidewalks, streetlights, or adequate drainage, living in dilapidated housing and paying exorbitant rent, managed by slum-lords with the knowledge that they have a captive market. The contrast between Black and White neighborhoods is startling. The City of Mobile invested two million dollars for Top Golf, and yet there is no permanent housing for our homeless population. There is no temporary

housing in Mobile for unsheltered women with children. It is no coincidence that our poor neighborhoods are also food deserts. Africatown, a once thriving community, has been made a toxic menagerie of dirty industry causing serious health problems for the few residents left... not unlike the people of Matamoros... both groups, victims of the corrupt power of the status quo; what the biblical scribes call sin. It doesn't have to be that way. And if we are silent, as the church has often been, we are complicit. Vision, sisters and brothers, conversion, is engendered in the borderlands, in crisis, in the places where life is tenuous and provisional. Transformation requires our presence there in those places.

I want to say that conversion is contagious; that it flourishes in community. The writer of John's Gospel talks a lot about his testimony being sure and credible.... He, and the community for whom he writes, have seen with their own eyes the saving work of the Gospel of Christ. They have experienced what dignity and freedom can do for a person. They call it the love of God. Love that, as followers of Jesus, we bear in our flesh and blood. That is Incarnation... not a once-upon-a-time bit of magic, but a present reality in which we are born to participate.

The Word come down from heaven, the Word of Spirit and Truth, brings a simple message, a practical vision that we are here to give life to the ones deprived of it. That is our high calling. May we be converted to it.