

Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:5-42

Third Sunday in Lent
Midway Presbyterian Church
March 15, 2020

Living Water

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson for this Third Sunday in Lent, we hear of the Israelites complaining of thirst in the wilderness, following their escape from Egyptian slavery. God provides water from the rock at Horeb. Listen to these words from Exodus 17:1-7...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson we hear the familiar story of Jesus at the well in Samaria, offering living water to the Samaritan woman. Listen to these words from John 4:5-42...

Sermon

Can you recall a time when you experienced great thirst? Some of you may remember me telling of a time when I was running track back in high school in Mississippi. The first meet of the year was the Canton Rotary held at Canton High School, about 25 miles from my hometown of Jackson. I had run in several races, and following the meet we got on the bus to ride back home. I had not had any water following the meet, and I was oh, oh, so thirsty—thirstier than I can ever remember being.

How easily we take water for granted. Happily, where we live there is plenty of clean, life-sustaining water. And today there is a dazzling array of waters, domestic and imported, from which we can choose to quench our thirsts. But we know that this is not the case in some parts of the world, where people carry buckets to a village well or a river to draw water. In California water shortages are altering life in significant ways.

And in our lesson from John we find that Jesus, weary from travel, sought the welcome refreshment of cool, well-water, at noon in a dusty place in Samaria. The place is identified as Jacob's well, famous for centuries as the place where the patriarch Jacob had found water. It was on the land that he had given his son Joseph. And the well is still there today, about an hour's drive north of Jerusalem.

Jesus was tired when he came to that well-known stopping place between Jerusalem and Galilee. His departure from Jerusalem had been hurried and troubled, being forced to leave because of the fury of his opposition. The disciples had gone to the town of Sychar for food when the Lord met a lone visitor to the well—a Samaritan woman. In contrast to Nicodemus, whom we looked at last week, the woman is uneducated, while Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel. She is a Samaritan; he a Jew. She has a shameful moral past; he was a respected moral leader in the community. She meets Jesus at noontime; he at midnight. She—a woman; he—a man. She—a nobody; he—a somebody.

Being a nobody is not an easy mantle to wear, except maybe for Emily Dickinson, who appeared to relish the role in her poem, "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" For Dickinson the idea of being a public somebody was a gloomy prospect. But most people want to avoid the pain of being nobodies; they want to be recognized and cherished as somebody who matters.

The Samaritan woman had come at an hour when most of the other women of the town would not be present at the well. Perhaps she was alone because of her reputation—having gone through five husbands, taking now a man not her husband.

Jesus had nothing with which to draw water, so he asks the woman for a drink. She was surprised that he would speak to her at all—relations between Jews and Samaritans being what they were. Besides, strange women were not spoken to by Jewish men. But the recorded conversation with the Samaritan woman is longer than that of Jesus with anyone else in the

Gospels. He talks to her at greater length than he talks to any of his disciples, any of his accusers, or anyone in his family. Right there in the light of day, Jesus talks with this Samaritan, this questionable woman, this outsider, as though none of that will be a barrier between them.

The Samaritan woman does have one thing in common with Nicodemus, for like him she takes the words of Jesus quite literally, when they are meant spiritually. William Barclay notes that in ordinary language to the Jew, *living* water was *running* water. It was the water of the running stream in contrast to the water of the stagnant cistern or pool. This well where Jesus and the woman conversed was not a springing well, but a well into which the water percolated from the subsoil. To the Jew, running, living water from the stream was always better. The woman says, "You are offering me pure stream water: Where are you going to get it?" She goes on to speak of "our father Jacob." The Jews would have adamantly denied that Jacob was the father of the Samaritans, but it was part of the Samaritan claim that they were descended from Joseph, the son of Jacob, by way of Ephraim and Manasseh. In effect the woman was saying to Jesus, "This talk of living water is blasphemous. Jacob, our great ancestor, when he came here, he had to dig this well to gain water for his family and his cattle. If you are claiming to be able to get fresh, running stream water, you are claiming to be wiser and more powerful than Jacob. And that is a claim no one has a right to make."

Now in that day when people were on a journey, they usually carried with them a bucket made from the skin of some animal so that they could draw water from a well where they stopped. No doubt Jesus' little band had such a bucket; and no doubt they had taken it into town with them. The woman could see that Jesus did not have any such bucket, so again she says in effect, "You need not talk about drawing water and giving it to me. I can see for myself that you have not got a bucket with which to draw water."

But the Jews had another way of using the word *water*. They often spoke of the thirst of the soul for God and of quenching that thirst with *living water*, as we find in Psalm 42:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God. (Psalm 42:1-2a)

Jesus was using terms that anyone with spiritual insight should have understood.

And to the woman's amazement, Jesus made a startling statement. He said that he could give her living water which would banish her thirst forever. This was nothing less than a claim to be the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, who was to bring in the new age when people would neither hunger nor thirst. Again, the woman took Jesus' words with a crude literalism. While they are not exactly on the same wavelength, the woman says that she wants this water Jesus is offering so that she can stay home and not have to come carrying these buckets to this well.

And this is where Jesus brings up her husband. Talk about changing the subject. "Isn't he getting a little personal? I thought we were discussing water." She could have lied, but instead she acknowledges that she is not married. And with that Jesus enunciates the rest of the truth about her. It's true, the choices she has made have not satisfied her deepest needs. "If he knows about all my husbands, no telling what else he knows." Better change the subject back to religion: "Where should we worship God? At the Samaritan's mountain or the Jewish temple?"

Jesus says that the true worshippers will worship in spirit and in truth. Finally, not knowing what else to say, the woman offers, "Won't it be great when the Messiah comes?" And Jesus replies, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." "You?!"

At the center of all this is the fundamental truth that in the human heart there is a thirst that only Jesus Christ can quench. Augustine said it well: “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.” (*Confessions*, Book 1)

In Henri Nouwen’s *A Cry for Mercy*, we find this beautiful prayer:

Every day I see again that only you can teach me to pray, only you can set my heart at rest, only you can let me dwell in your presence. No book, no idea, no concept or theory will ever bring me close to you unless you yourself are the one who lets these instruments become the way to you.

In Charles Frazier’s popular 1997 Civil War novel, *Cold Mountain*, a wounded Confederate soldier named Inman is trying to make his way home from the ravages of war. Along the way he meets an old gypsy-like woman who lives alone with a caravan of animals—goats, chickens, etc. She prepares food for the starving Inman. Also, she has tracts on sin and salvation, and one on a proper diet:

“It says on the front it will change your life if you follow it,” she said. “But I’m making no claims.”

Inman looked through the pamphlet. It was poorly printed on coarse grey paper. There were headings like The Potato: Food of the Gods. The Collard: Tonic for the Spirit. Graham Flour: Pathway to the More Abundant Life.

“It’s what many seek,” the woman said. “But I’m not sure a sack of graham flour will set your foot on it.”

“Yes,” Inman said. Abundance did seem, in his experience, to be an elusive thing.

“Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”

In her memoir, *Traveling Mercies* (which is in our church library), Anne Lamott writes about why she stays so close to her church. She says, “I think we missed church ten times in twelve years. Our son Sam would be snuggled in people’s arms in the earlier shots, shyly trying to wriggle free of hugs in the later ones.” She tells of their pastor Veronica who sings to them from the pulpit and who tells them stories of when she was a child.

In one story she tells about a time when she was 7 years old and her best friend got lost. "The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was frightened. Finally, a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.'"

Lamott states, "And that is why I have stayed so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, when I hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home."

"Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

I love that old hymn "Fill My Cup, Lord":

Like the woman at the well I was seeking
 For things that could not satisfy;
 But then I heard my Savior speaking:
 "Draw from the well that never shall run dry".

Fill my cup Lord, I lift it up, Lord!
 Come and quench this thirsting of my soul;
 Bread of heaven, Feed me till I want no more--
 Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!

My friends, on this Third Sunday in Lent, take note. Jesus knew about the skeletons in the closet of the Samaritan woman, and yet he cared for her anyway. His grace was not prisoner to her status, her gender, her religion, her ethnicity, her past. The thirst of her soul could be quenched. The God that we know in Jesus Christ is the source of living water. This Fount of Every Blessing. Don't look to anyone else or anything else. Trust him with all your heart, and drink deeply at the wellspring of his grace in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.