

March 23, 2014

John 4:5-42

Exodus 17:1-7

“Drought Relief”

If you were here last Sunday, you heard from the 3rd chapter of the Gospel of John the story of Nicodemus, a highly educated Pharisaic Jew, going to Jesus in the dark of night to try to figure out who Jesus was. This encounter seemed to end with Nicodemus being confused, especially after Jesus started talking about being born again or “from above.” The “lights” did not come on for this learned man of high position.

Today’s Gospel lesson, from John’s fourth chapter, was very different. Instead of occurring in the dead of night, this one happened around noon, in the brightest and hottest time of the day. Today’s encounter did not have someone approaching Jesus. Instead, Jesus, who had been traveling with his disciples and who had stayed at the well while they went into town to get some food, saw a lone woman approach the well – a Samaritan woman – and started a conversation with her.

As they stood there in the heat of the day, Jesus asked her for some help: “Give me a drink.” Nowadays, this has little effect on us, but back then, for a Jewish man to even acknowledge a Samaritan, let alone a woman, was scandalous! The Jews detested the Samaritans and considered them totally unclean half-breeds who had defiled the Jewish religion. On top of that, Jesus spoke to a *woman*, which would have been another huge no-no!

The woman called Jesus’ hand on this: “Why are you, a Jewish man, talking to me? Jews don’t have any dealings with Samaritans.”

Jesus answered her by telling her that if she knew who was asking for the drink she would have asked HIM for a drink, and he would have given her living water.

Again this woman met him directly: “What do you mean? You don’t have a bucket, and this is a deep well! Where are you going to get this living water you’re talking about? Are you better than Jacob, who gave us this well?”

Jesus answered, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again. But whoever drinks of the water I give shall have within a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”

The woman responded, “Give me this water! If you do, I won’t thirst and will not have to come here to draw water again!” The woman took Jesus’ offer literally, as so many do in John’s gospel.

Then Jesus changed course: “Go, call your husband.” OUCH! How did he know? He hit the nail of her shame right on the head....”I have none...” And Jesus responded: “True, for you have had five husbands, and the man you are with now is not your husband...”

A prophet! There in the heat of the parched existence of this woman’s life, God had sent her a

prophet! A nobody, a sinner, a woman held in disdain by everybody, even herself, and yet God's prophet had spoken to her, God's prophet knew her!!

These days we may think of all the celebrities we hear about breaking up with their third and fourth spouses on a regular basis and find this woman's history less than shocking, so we do well to realize that in Jesus' day, a woman had no power to divorce her husband. Only the husband could divorce, sending his wife away if she displeased him in any way. So this woman had been rejected by FIVE husbands!! No alimony, only disgrace, poverty, and the need to somehow find a way to survive. No wonder she tried to avoid the other women who came to the well.

The fact that Jesus knew this about her told the woman that this was no ordinary man; he had to be a prophet! Surprisingly, she asked him about an issue that sharply divided her people from the Jews: "Who's right about where to worship? The Jews say the Temple in Jerusalem, while my people say that the proper place to worship is on Mount Gerazim. Who's right?"

Jesus moved the issue out of the realm of place and into the realm of worshiping God in spirit and truth. At that point, the woman spoke of her hope for the Messiah to come to teach them all things....and Jesus told her – an outsider, a despised Samaritan woman who had been with six men – that he was the Messiah!!

Jesus talked longer to this woman than he did to anyone else in all the Gospels - longer than he talked to any of his disciples, longer than he talked to any of his accusers, longer than he talked to any of his own family. In the Gospel of John, this woman is the first person to whom Jesus revealed himself. She was the first outsider to guess who he was and to tell others about him. She shared her encounter in such a way that the townspeople believed her and begged Jesus to stay with them for two days.... The woman's question, "Can this be the Messiah?" resounded in, of all places, Samaria. Many became believers because of this woman whose life had been so dried up and hopeless.

The story from Exodus is one of several instances where the Hebrew people, having been delivered out of the slavery in Egypt but still wandering in a harsh wilderness, question the trustworthiness of God. Today we heard the complaints hurled toward Moses: "Why did you bring us out here from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" Such complaints have always intrigued me, for it had been only a short while since the people had seen the wonder of God's power against Pharaoh. They had witnessed the plagues God had put on Egypt, including the Passover. They had seen the Sea of Reeds (or Red Sea) parted so that they could cross over with dry feet; they had heard the screams of the Egyptians as the waters swept over those who pursued the Israelites. They had seen God's power firsthand, and yet they quickly fell, time and again, into complaint, fear, and doubt.

I've often thought it strange that the people lost sight of the promises God had made to them...But then I think of my own life, and I see that we are not so different. WE have been

given even greater promises, through Jesus, and yet we find ourselves doubting, criticizing, wondering if God is even here at all.... The place where Moses watered the people was called "Meribah," or "complaint," to reflect the faithless attitude of the people. Perhaps many of *our own* places could be similarly named. Even so, we must not forget that, there in that dry land, God provided water for the dissenting people. God's grace met their needs. That's the story of the entire Bible: God putting up with and even loving people who do not appreciate what God has done for them...God providing God's people with what they need for life.

In both of today's lessons, God ended up providing water and hope for folks who were hungry and thirsty for life. That's what God does; God did it thousands of years ago, and God does it today.

These days California and other states in the West are facing profound, life-changing, drought conditions, the worst in decades. Meanwhile, other parts of our country are dealing with floods, having received too much precipitation. Spiritually, though, there seems to be a pretty bad drought throughout our land, as we take our blessings for granted, most of the time not even thanking God for our meals, and as our younger generations cling to technology (computers, cell phones, etc) and material possessions instead of a relationship with and trust in God. There is a spiritual drought in our society!

We are thirsty. We may be thirsty as we doubt God's power or intent to save us when our lives seem like barren, dried up, or overwhelming wildernesses... Our lives may feel like one big, dry complaint.. We may be thirsty in the way Nicodemus (in last week's lesson) was, as we have tried to follow our own rules and to do every "I," and yet know that we haven't managed to save ourselves.... We may be thirsty in ways similar to that woman at the well: we may feel like outsiders, even in terms of our faith; we may be trying to hide things about ourselves from others, from God, perhaps even from ourselves; we may find the ground of our lives harder and drier as we go along.... We may thirst for hope, for faith, for love...

This story was not an accident. It was given to show the wide scope of God's arms and care. It was given to let us know that, even 2000+ years later and all the way around the world from Jacob's well, Jesus STILL breaks down all barriers and crosses all human-created borders to come to us to offer us the water that runs deep enough to reach even our most desperate thirsting.

Somewhere I read a commentator who used the term "spiritual dehydration." The term fits much of our contemporary experience. There is a longing, an emptiness in life, crying out for the "real thing." (Not Coke!) Someone once wrote that there is a "God-sized" hole in the heart of every person. Until we let GOD fill it, our lives will be an unsatisfying clutter of things which cannot give us peace or lasting joy.

Tim Downs made a to-the-point comment about Christians who need to be filled: "Watches, cars, and Christians can all look chromed and shiny. But watches don't tick, cars don't go, and

Christians don't make a difference without insides. For a Christian, that's God's Holy Spirit."
(*Inspiring Quotations*, A.M. Wells, ed.)

So hear this: Jesus will meet us where we really are, where we are hiding from others, where we are most ashamed, where we have the most challenging questions, where we are willing to step beyond the boundaries and bigotries cherished by our society. He meets us where we really are and offers us life and hope as we really need it.

The message of today's gospel story is two-fold:

One: If you are parched and despairing and feeling totally unworthy of any attention from God, you are just the kind of person Jesus Christ came to save.

And TWO: It is often through our "uncleanness," our limitations, our weaknesses, that God can best reach through us to others who are also dying of thirst in this life-parching world. Just as he did through the woman at the well so many years ago.

May we meet Jesus in the places where we are most thirsty. May we let him draw us out, so that we can see ourselves as we really are and through his love see who Christ really is. May we be filled with living water, with the Holy Spirit of God, as we discover for ourselves that in Christ God has provided salvation for the world and made it possible for our spirits to receive deep and everlasting drought-relief!. Amen.