

**3 Lent  
March 15, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Some of the stories in our Bible have as much written between the lines as in the text itself. This story of the woman at the well is one of them. The story happens in Samaria ... an area that we know now as the West Bank. It happens at the well in Sychar ... a very special well in the faith journey of the Jews. And, it happens with a woman in the middle of the day ... another story written between the lines that indicates that this woman was both marginalized and vulnerable.

In this reading from John's gospel Jesus is returning to Galilee from the highlands of Judea and decides to journey through the district of Samaria. This must have been an intentional choice on his part as it was somewhat out of the way, and certainly not a destination a Jew would necessarily have chosen. The people of Samaria, and the Jewish people who surrounded them, had their differences and generally avoided each other.

The reason for these differences between the Jews and the Samaritans dates to the Babylonian exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The Assyrians had conquered Israel and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Then they had captured and relocated to Babylon the brightest and best of the Jewish people, but they had also left behind others who were deemed of little value to them. Some of these were the people who lived in Samaria. During the exile, while their fellow countrymen were in Babylon undergoing a renewal in faith, the Samaritans were trying to survive under occupation. They did so by adapting to the occupying Assyrian culture, and often marrying ... outside their faith ... those that had invaded their homeland. And since the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed the people living in Samaria established a temple on Mt. Gerizim which was nearby. Thus, when the faithful Jews who had been in exile in Babylon returned after the Persians defeated the Assyrians these returning Jews looked down upon the Samaritans who they felt had not upheld the orthodoxy of their faith.

So, for Jesus, a Jew, to journey through Samaria was an interesting choice. He went to the town of Sychar. The well in Sychar was no ordinary well ... it was Jacob's well where he met Rachel. And it is here that Jesus encountered a woman at the well ... much like Jacob encountered Rachel. They had a discussion about physical thirst and spiritual thirst ... a spiritual thirst for something deep in one's soul that could only be satiated with "living water."

Jesus' simple request for a drink of water provoked a dialogue with a marginalized woman that teaches us that God does not desire any human being to shrivel and die from a broken body or a parched soul. Rather, he longs to quench our deepest needs and desires with the "living water" of God's Spirit. Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well reminds us that the community Jesus inaugurated calls for a people of inclusion not exclusion, dignity not denigration, empowerment rather than exploitation, and affirmation rather than marginalization.

So, why this story of Jesus in this setting? Why "living water" in Samaria and not on the shores of Galilee, or the banks of the Jordan River, or at Bethany near Jerusalem, or on the mountaintop? What does Samaria have to do with all this, and why at Jacob's well of all places?

To a Jew hearing this story ... knowing that it was the well in Sychar ... the story would come alive with the recollection of its history and all its meaning. You may remember that Jacob had fooled his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that belonged to his twin brother Esau, and when Esau discovered Jacob's duplicity then Jacob had to flee from his brother's wrath. Their mother Rebekah ... taking sides with Jacob against his brother ... and her other son ... Esau, sent Jacob to seek her brother Laban and to marry one of Laban's daughters. When Jacob arrived in Haran, the land of his uncle Laban, he met several shepherds ready to water their flocks at a spring covered with a large stone. It was at this "well" that Jacob met Rachel. Jacob was an exile from his own family, and he was in a strange land. Moreover, it was Jacob who rolled away the stone covering the well so that Rachel's sheep could drink. That is how this well in Sychar ... in the area of Samaria ... got its name. And, the mere mention of the well at Sychar would have evoked the larger story of exile, marginalization, and being a foreigner in a strange land.

In many ways this story in John's gospel is similar to the story of Jacob in Haran ... only with a twist. The Jews had been the ones who were exiled, but it was the Samaritans who were the strangers in their own land. Jesus entered the city and spoke to a Samaritan with whom he, as a Jew, was estranged. Not only is this person a Samaritan, but a woman ... out getting water at the well in the middle of the day. Most women went to the well to get their needed water in the cool morning or evening. It was not just a daily chore, but also a social gathering of the women of the village. That this woman was at the well in the middle of the day suggests that she was ostracized from her own community of women ... an outcast within outcasts. And Jesus asked her ... of all people ... for a drink.

A proper woman in those days would have dropped a bucket in the well and pulled out cool water for this stranger, even if he was a Jew. And she most probably would have done so in silence. But this woman was emboldened, perhaps by her past, and she challenged Jesus. To paraphrase what she said to Jesus: "Who do you think you are to ask me, a Samaritan woman, to fetch you a drink?" Now Jesus' response could be read as a chastisement, but I think he is expressing sympathy. As if he could see into her soul

he responded (again paraphrasing): “I can see that you need your life back, and I have living water to quench the thirst of your spirit.” That this stranger acknowledged her as a person worthy of conversation spoke volumes. That he talked of spiritual things with her said even more. Again, emboldened by Jesus’ words she asked for this “living water.”

When you connect the dots of her story, you realize that this woman epitomized the many ways that society marginalizes people. Jesus shattered all the taboos that held sway then ... and still do today ... gender discrimination, the moral stigma of serial marriages, ritual purity having to do with sharing a drinking cup with a Samaritan, and socio-economic poverty since any woman married five times must have been poor.

I believe that there is a bit of this woman in all of us ... thirsty for something that will quench the emptiness in our souls. Like this woman, we cannot believe that someone would cross the boundaries of our unacceptability to offer us “living water.” We feel unworthy of recognition, much less a compassionate response. We guard ourselves with armor of defiance and defensiveness, much like this woman with her sarcastic response to Jesus. And I think Jesus went to this Samaritan city of Sychar just because he knew he would find vulnerable people like this woman ... not only seen as outcasts from Judaism, but even outcast from their own community of outcasts. Jesus went to Sychar because it was in just such a place that people would be thirsty for “living water.”

So what is this “living water?” According to Jesus, “those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty [again]. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” It sounds enticing. But it also sounds rather abstract. Maybe the question needs to be, “For what in our lives do we thirst?”

When I look at people around me today I see folk who want wholeness in their lives. They want meaningful relationships, jobs with dignity and purpose, a sense of contributing to the world around them so that they leave it a better place than when they found it. The healthy thirst I see is for a sense of worthiness; of being loved and desire to give oneself in love; a trust of others and a respect of self. People thirst for a life where they are not only included, but also valued.

Yet we live in a world that complicates and confuses these desires. We are known not so much by who we are as by what we are. It is the college degree we hold, or the job we have, or the possessions we own, or the way we look, or the money we make ... or any number of other defining factors. In addition, the world is not always kind to us. The economy turns sour, or we are surrounded with a novel disease, or a primary relationship goes bad, or we just feel stuck in a rut ... trying to just keep things together. This is when we become acutely aware of our thirst, and I think this is a spiritual thirst. We feel separated from others around us ... literally by “social distancing,” and figuratively when we just don’t seem to fit in. And sometimes we feel separated from ourselves ... our passions and desires. Some may try to assuage their thirst with other

forms of spirit such as alcohol or drugs. Others may try to fill the emptiness with over-consumption ... food, possessions, toys, or excitement. But whatever fills them in the moment leaves the ever-present emptiness as an after-taste, and the cycle begins again. Jesus said to the woman at the well, "Whoever drinks of this water [of the well] will be thirsty again."

That living water is a soulful knowing that we are all God's children ... accepted, loved, and made worthy to love regardless of what is going on in the world around us. We may do bad things at times, but we are not bad people. We may be outcasts of one kind or another, but that doesn't separate us from God's love. We may be separated from each other by being quarantined, but that doesn't separate us from being the Body of Christ. We are made in God's image and we are blessed. When we begin to envision ourselves as beloved and blessed children of God, and consider all the possibilities that means for us in our lives, then we are drinking of that "living water."

Jesus went out of his way to enter a community of outcasts. He crossed a geographic boundary to get there. He crossed a social and religious boundary to speak to a woman who was an outcast of outcasts. In the mere act of acknowledging her as a fellow human being worthy of conversation, he caused her to drop her armor and open herself up to spiritual healing. Jesus was thirsty for a drink of water. She was thirsty for "living water" to quench the thirst in her soul.

We, too, know thirst in our souls. That thirst may take many forms, and sometimes it may be overwhelming. Often we try to alleviate that spiritual thirst by substituting other forms of spirit. Sometimes we become cynical, and defensive. Nevertheless, even those boundaries can be crossed by a God whose love created us, and who desires nothing more than that we live into the fullest image of that creation. What might life look like for you if you were to taste of that "living water" that Jesus offer the woman at the well? Who might you be if you were to believe yourself worthy of God's love? Who could you become if you knew yourself to be a blessed child of God? Jesus, and God, cross the boundaries of our human weaknesses to tell us that we can always be more than we think we are. Jesus said, "The water I will give [you] will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Amen.