

Third Weekend in Lent (RCL/A): "Got Thirst?"

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

March 11-12, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

More important than trail mix or granola, more important than sturdy, broken-in hiking boots, more important than insect repellent, more important than a phone to capture scenery or call for help in an emergency, is **water** on a hike of any distance. When we visit Holden Village in the Glacier Peak Wilderness in the Northern Cascades of Washington State, one of our favorite hikes is to Holden Lake, past cascading waterfalls, through subalpine meadows loaded with lupine, across little streams fringed with giant bluebells, on a trail that includes 20 switchbacks on a steep incline before entering a forest where we have, on occasion, seen bear. When we finally reach the steely-blue glacier-fed lake, we plop down on the grass and enjoy our bag lunch, usually consisting of PB&J sandwiches, homemade cookies and an apple. When we factor in the incredible view and the delightful company of whistling marmots, it's the gourmet meal of the year!

5 miles up to the lake, 5 miles back to the village. We have hiking belts that include a pouch where I keep my wildflower book and my phone, and loops to hang 2 water bottles, leaving us hands free. We also have knapsacks, in which each of us usually carries yet another water bottle. We're careful with the water, not wanting to get dehydrated, which happens more quickly at that elevation, but also knowing it's gotta last us all day, from early morning to late afternoon. There's plenty of water in this wilderness, but it's from streams and lakes. Although there's no pollution from humans, who wants to risk getting giardia (also called beaver fever), a nasty intestinal parasite passed on through animal droppings?

One particularly hot day, Pastor Mark ran out of water while we were still a mile and a half out from the village on our return trip. I gave him the rest of mine, but it wasn't much. We didn't realize he was already suffering from the myasthenia gravis that resulted in multiple hospitalizations and medical leave from the Army. He sat down, unable to go any further without water. All of a sudden, water was the most important thing in the world. We're not accustomed to that in our comfortable world where we're never far from a water spigot or a water fountain or at least a vendor or a store selling water.

The Israelites in today's first lesson were in their own wilderness. They had been freed by God from slavery in Egypt, where 95% of the population still lives within a short distance of a river. Now they're in a desert, no oasis in sight. God has miraculously provided food (manna and quail), but they have no water. They're thirsty. They're afraid. They're grumpy. They're whining: again. Last time they whined, God sent poisonous serpents. This time, God commands Moses to pick up the staff with which he had struck the Nile and turned it into blood, one of the plagues visited upon Pharaoh. This time God commands him to strike the rock, which he does, making fresh water flow forth. Yet, the memory of the miracle, of God's loving provision for the people, is overshadowed by the community's complaints and shocking question, showing how shallow their trust is: *"Is the LORD among us or not?"* (Exod. 17:7)

That's like the question the woman at the well asks her neighbors in today's Gospel:

"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (John 4:29)

She had been minding her own business, going about her daily routine, doing her chores – but must have gotten off schedule somehow, because she ends up at the well at high noon, an odd time to fill your water jar, because it is just too darn hot to be out in the sun. Some say that was intentional, that she was avoiding her neighbors, since they considered her "less-than," having been married 5x and all.... But if she was such a pariah, why did the townsfolk listen with such interest to her story about the man she met at the well? She must have had a certain amount of credibility, because St. John tells us:

"Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.'" (John 4:39)

Ray Brown, a Roman Catholic priest and 20th century Biblical scholar, focused his study and writings on the 4th Gospel, the Gospel of John, from which we're hearing a lot these Lenten weekends. In his commentary on this Gospel he writes:

By Rabbinic standards Jesus could hardly have done a more shatteringly unconventional thing than talk to this woman.¹

There are a few different reasons for this.

- 1) She was a woman, and Jewish men didn't talk to women unless they were closely related to them, no less to strangers on the street.
- 2) She was a Samaritan, and Jews **definitely** didn't talk to Samaritans, who were considered half-breeds and betrayers who had consorted with the enemy. (It all went back to the Assyrian invasion around 722 B.C. The educated Jews of the northern kingdom of Israel were carried off to Assyria, never to return; we call them the Lost Tribes of the House of Israel. The peasants stayed behind, and, as always happens, intermarried with the military force of occupation. The Jews from Judah in the south never forgave them for "fraternizing with the enemy.")
- 3) This anonymous woman at the well has a sketchy history. We don't know why, but she had had five husbands and by the time she encounters Jesus is living with a 6th man. She could scarcely have scored lower on the "acceptable company" meter.

Yet this is the woman to whom Jesus reveals His true identity, straight out, no beating around the bush, no requirement that she keep it to herself. Max Lucado in his *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God*, writes:

Remarkable. Jesus didn't reveal the secret to King Herod. He didn't request an audience of the Sanhedrin and tell the news. It wasn't within the colonnades of a Roman court that he announced his identity.

No, it was in the shade of a well in a rejected land to an ostracized woman. His eyes must have danced as he whispered the secret.

"I am the Messiah."²

He reveals this to a woman who was thirsty for God, thirstier for God than for the well water she had come to draw up in her bucket. In her excitement, in her need for speed, she leaves behind her water jar as she sprints into town to tell her friends and neighbors whom she has met, how inexplicably well this stranger knows her, and to share her dawning awareness that He is indeed the Messiah. They, too, are thirsty for God, because they rush to the well with her to meet this man, on whom they are willing to pin their hopes, too. They invite Jesus to stay with them, much like the disciples from Emmaus in St. Luke's Gospel will beseech the risen Lord to dine with them. He does tarry there, for 2 days. St. John reports:

"... many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." (John 4:41-42)

The hated Samaritans are the only ones in John's Gospel who name Jesus as "the Savior of the world." He **is**, and they are singled out to recognize as much and to bestow on Him that beautiful title.

This story about Jesus offering the Samaritan woman at the well "living water" is only told in the 4th

Gospel. Scholars tell us that perhaps this is because the community that received that Gospel included a significant number of Samaritans, faithful descendants of the woman at the well. She was thirsty! Are we now as thirsty as she was then?

On that day when Pastor Mark and I waited waterless by the path leading back to Holden Village, a “good Samaritan” came by and insisted on giving him her water bottle. Her act of charity was water for our wilting spirits as well as literal water to quench Pastor Mark’s thirst. The psalmist once wrote:

*1-3 A white-tailed deer drinks
from the creek;
I want to drink God,
deep drafts of God.
I’m thirsty for God-alive.
I wonder, “Will I ever make it—
arrive and drink in God’s presence?” (Psalm 42)*

We have arrived in God’s presence today. Let us drink deeply of Word & Sacrament and invite others to do the same. Amen

¹Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 162.

²Max Lucado, *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 50.

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