

Sermon for Lent 3A
Sunday, March 12, 2023
“Living Water”

Text: Collect of the Day; Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; John 4:5-42

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we continue our cycle of lectionary readings for Lent, today we shift the focus from examination of our relationship with God and him with us to contemplating our relationship with each other. We just heard that powerful story featuring Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, and just as the lectionary reading is long, there are a lot of points that can be explored as well. But in order to unpack all that this passage from John’s Gospel has to say, some exegesis—or biblical explanation—is in order. Let’s take a look at this passage in its context and for what it is and discover what it has to say to us.

Jesus is traveling and winds up in the Samaritan city of Sychar. This is significant, because Jews at the time had no business going to or being in Samaria. The tension between Judeans in the south and Samaritans in the north began some seven centuries earlier when the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and began colonizing the region with people from several foreign nations. This led to intermarriage, which was forbidden to Jews, and adoption of their gods, which was also forbidden to Jews, who were supposed to worship Yahweh, Jehovah, or God alone. The tensions between Jews and Samaritans were further exacerbated by King Herod the Great who also allowed foreigners to colonize Samaria. Jews were not supposed to travel to Samaria or have any contact or dealings with Samaritans. The Samaritan temple at Mt. Gezarim was considered to be an invalid place of worship for Jews as well; there was only one temple and it was in Jerusalem, in Judea in the south. Nevertheless, Jesus found himself in Samaria at a well that ancient Jewish tradition claimed to have been constructed by the patriarch, Jacob—father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Gospel tells us that while Jesus was at that well, he asked a local woman for water. He wouldn’t draw it out himself because, in his culture, men didn’t draw water from wells; that was a woman’s task. Here is a significant irony here: Jesus had a cultural advantage over the woman just by being a man in a male-dominated society, but was at a disadvantage as a weary, thirsty traveler who needed the woman to draw water for him from the well. So, he asked for water from a woman who was there doing her daily task of getting water to bring back home for whatever she needed that required water. Worse still, the woman was a Samaritan, and she quickly pointed out that by speaking to her Jesus had broken a well-known rule that Jews weren’t supposed to talk to Samaritans. We don’t know what gave Jesus away as a Galilean Jew; perhaps it was his accent or his clothing. John (or perhaps a later editor of John’s Gospel) added an editorial comment to remind his readers that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.”

Next, Jesus started digging into her personal life by bring up her husbands. I would imagine that when most of us read about this, we think she's a woman with a past, but we have to bear in mind something about how marriage worked back then. Jews and Samaritans had similar practices, because they shared common ancestry. Judaism followed the custom of *levirate* marriage, which is described in Genesis. That meant that if a woman's husband died, his brother was required to marry her. That was important socially, because a woman without a husband faced a life of poverty and social marginalization. What we don't hear in John's telling of this story is the possibility that she had married and outlived each of four brothers, but then the last brother refused to marry her. Her having five husbands may have been the result of a string of unfortunate events in her personal life.

Finally, there was the little exchange with the disciples. When they returned, they seemed to give the woman the cold shoulder, perhaps because their revered mentor was talking to a Samaritan woman. They gave the impression that the message of the Messiah was only for valid for legitimate Jews. They were placing custom above charity and that doesn't fly with Jesus. And, as was frequently the case, those whom one would not have expected to recognize Jesus for who he really was, did. Eventually she recognized that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ, and went on to tell others in her city about it. She brought many people, others who were outcasts in the eyes of the Jews and not expected to recognize Jesus. Nevertheless, they recognized him as the Messiah and began to follow him as well. He stayed in Sychar two days and many came to believe: "For we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Our world and our time aren't so different from that of Jesus and the woman at Jacob's Well. We struggle with hatred and intolerance of others: racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and insensitivity toward different religions and even narrow-mindedness about the interpretation of the Bible. We act like we don't want others to enjoy the benefits of living in this country. We discriminate because of one's skin color or where they've come from. We don't respect persons who identify themselves in ways that differ from the box we've put them in. We don't treat women with equal respect. Around the globe, women are being mistreated emotionally and physically, and being denied basic necessities like education and a voice in public.

But Jesus offered living water. Jesus offered something that the world was either refusing or too oblivious to give. Jesus was offering a new way of living together with each other in community—a community of persons who care about each other and care for each other. A community that respects each other because it recognizes that we all part of God's creation. We need to be reminded of that, because although we passed through living waters at our baptism, too often we forget what we are called to do and be as a part of the community of followers of the teachings of Jesus the Christ. I love this summarization that I ran across in one of the commentaries that I read on today's gospel passage. It said that: "Jesus left us with a crucial lesson to be learned:

community can only be built when we are not afraid of overcoming old prejudices and are willing to break the social conventions that dehumanize us. The living water that Jesus promised the woman, symbolized in the water that Moses made come out of the rock in Exodus 17 [that was our first lesson], is God's purifying water, the Holy Spirit, which can purify our hearts of old hatreds and hostilities and form us into a diverse people of God on earth."

Finally, we must not overlook the other message that today's Gospel offers that God provides us with what we need. That is a central theme of the Lenten season. Today's opening collect reminds us that none of us has the power within ourselves to help ourselves. Rather, that we depend on God's help, God's protection, and God's love and mercy to get us through each day, each year, even in the toughest of times. God helps us get through the worst situations that we face. Just as God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness with water from a rock and manna from above, he will provide for us. We thrive, not simply by our own devices, but through the mercy and love of God.

Jesus offers us living water. He offers us an opportunity to live in this world in harmony beyond our prejudices, expectations, and imaginations. He offers us an opportunity to connect with our sisters and brothers of this world to see the light of Christ burning within each and every one of us, just like he recognized it in the woman at the well when he offered her living water. And, he provides what we need. And we, too, should receive this water with the excitement of that Samaritan woman and tell the whole world about it. Amen.

Resources

Oswaldo Vena, "Commentary on John 4:5-42" in *The Working Preacher*,
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3189