

Lent 3  
March 19, 2017  
The Woman at the Well of Living Water  
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42;  
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Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.  
Gracia y paz de dios el Padre, Hijo y Espíritu Santo.  
Grace and peace from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Last summer, my husband and I walked the Portland to Coast Relay Walk. It is 129 miles from the Hawthorne Bridge in downtown Portland to the turnaround on Broadway in Seaside. It was not our first time to participate. We knew what we were getting into.

I was assigned to walk 5.25 miles beginning at 1 in the afternoon. I had walked the same leg the year before, so I knew the terrain. I knew what pace I could take. However, we had not anticipated the record-breaking heat. It was 95 degrees as I began to walk. The sun was bright and relentless. In my hand, I carried a 3-ounce bottle of water. It didn't take long for that cool water to absorb the heat of my hand. After the first mile along Highway 30 north of St. Helens, the course meanders through the small community of Columbia City then uphill past fields and a few houses ending at the Columbia County Fairgrounds. It was hot! I tried to take a sip of the heated water in my bottle. I felt like I was going to throw up. I wanted to sit down and quit. How could I finish this journey?

I was certain I was not alone in asking, as the Israelites asked: Is the Lord among us, or not? The Israelites were in the middle of the wilderness and there was no water. They began complaining to Moses, quarreling, actually, as in a legal argument against Moses. They demand their legal right to have water.

The quarreling quickly escalated from their need for water to a larger issue. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" they cried out, "To watch us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?" There is a deeper need in them than the need to quench their physical thirst.

God understands our physical needs. Jesus was tired and thirsty when he arrived in Sychar in the heat of the day. He experienced the same physical needs as the Israelites in the wilderness. The same physical needs we have. And God provides! In an unusual and unexpected way.

A Samaritan woman, going about her daily tasks, comes to the community water source. You can imagine her surprise to see a man sitting at the well in the middle of the day. Men would be working this time of day. Drawing water from the well was women's work.

She probably tried to avoid the man sitting there, women were allowed to speak only to their husbands and male relatives but this man, this JEWISH man, broke the rules by speaking to her first, by asking for a drink. Recognizing the scandal of a man speaking to a woman, compounded by the scandal of Jew speaking to a Samaritan she responds, how could a MAN, a JEW ask for a drink of water from a WOMAN, a SAMARITAN.

Her shock is so great that she forgets for the moment that she should not speak to this man, at all. But, Jesus has a way of shattering the old models and then reorienting them in new and refreshing ways.

Jesus reveals little by little how the woman's life would be radically different if she knew the gift of God living water. The dialogue between the woman and Jesus is astonishingly similar to the dialogue we heard last week between Nicodemus and Jesus.

Recall that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night confessing that Jesus is the Son of Man. But the poor guy went away totally confused by Jesus' words "unless you are born from above you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven".

Today, in broad daylight, Jesus approaches a woman, asks for a drink and then tells her that he can give her living water.

In both conversations, the words of Jesus can be taken literally or figuratively. Nicodemus AND the woman at the well hear the literal sense of Jesus words. Nicodemus cannot wrap his head around this "born again" idea and this woman just about gets it is likely envisioning fresh water freely flowing in a stream, not the water sitting in this deep well.

With what might be a deep sigh of resignation she says "boy, would I like to have some of this water you talk about. I'd never be thirsty again and I wouldn't have to come here every day to drag water back for the family, Sign me up!

The exchange in the middle of this story is often misguidedly interpreted as a sign of the woman's unworthiness to receive Jesus because of her sin of having so many husbands. It's almost as if Jesus dismisses her telling her to go away and get her husband.

Is this a set-up? A way to point out her promiscuity AND bring a man into the conversation who could understand the important message? Well, Nicodemus was a man, And he didn't understand what Jesus was trying to tell him, either.

No, this is Jesus revealing the astonishing love of God to this Samaritan woman who is living on the margins of this 1<sup>st</sup> century city.

Yes, she has had five husbands, no, the man she is with now is NOT her husband. We are quick to assume that she has divorced those husbands. It is possible that all of her husbands have died and the man she lives with now is her closest male relative.

Whatever her circumstances, Jesus is here, with her, right now, not to condemn but to fill her with the life-giving water of salvation. Listen closely, there is no condemnation in Jesus' words. Just facts.

Jesus is here not to punish . . . but to revive and refresh her soul.

Remember John 3:17? Jesus assures us that "God did not send the Son into the world to CONDEMN the world but that the world might be saved through him".

And so it is that a woman, a Samaritan, an outcast has the longest recorded conversation with Jesus. This unnamed woman becomes the first evangelist of record. She abandons her water jug and runs to the city to tell everyone "come and see! This could be the one for whom we have waited". She was not entirely certain, but she is compelled to tell her experience.

I was just about to give up on that scorching day in August. I didn't think I could go another step when, there in front of me stood two women inviting me to stop under the shade of their umbrella. I almost passed them by, thinking I had to do this on my own. They insisted I stop and let them drench me and refill my bottle with cool, clear water. Along the remainder of the course, others sat at the side of the road with bottled water, super-soakers and encouragement for parched walkers. As I handed the baton to my husband I shouted after him, "take advantage of the angels along the way". "Take the cool, refreshing water".

We encounter thirsty people every day, people longing for streams of living water. People longing to be invited to the table where they can taste and see the body and blood of Jesus Christ. To whom will you offer the living water of salvation?

Thanks be to God.