

Lent 3 A: March 12, 2023

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Exodus 17: 1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4: 5-42

Three years ago this Sunday I announced that we would be suspending in-person worship for a couple of weeks to see what would happen. It hardly seems possible that was 3 years ago! Well, let's go to the well of scripture with this wonderful story of Jesus and the woman at the well.

Let me start by giving you a little background for a fuller understanding of this story. First, we need to understand who the Samaritans were. The Samaritans were from Samaria – odd, I know – which was the region just north of Jerusalem/Judah; with a capital city named Samaria, near modern day Nablus. [see map]The Samaritans were essentially the remnant of some of the people of the Northern Tribes of Israel, especially Ephraim and Manasseh, who remained on the land after the Babylonian Captivity early in the 6th century BCE. They believed and kept only to the Pentateuch – the first 5 books of the Bible. When the Babylonian Captivity ended and the people of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, came back, they thought the Samaritans were apostates. For the Jews of Jerusalem and Judah, they were considered heretics and lower than the low. Rabbinical teaching said that good Jews should have nothing to do with Samaritans. Did you know there are still some Samaritans? According to some survey there were still about 777 in 2015 mostly in and around the West Bank.

So Jesus, having decided that maybe he was getting too much attention from the religious authorities, decided to go back north to Galilee and, interestingly, he decided to go through Samaria rather than up the Jordan River valley that might have been a bit more safer for Jews. He and his disciples stop at a well and his disciples go off to the local town to see if they could get some food. Jesus is sitting by the well, 'about the 6th hour' (Jews figured time from sunrise to sunset – about 12 hours, so this would have been about noon), weary and thirsty. A woman comes to the well, alone. So this is odd. Fetching water was a woman's job and most commonly was done at the beginning or end of the day out of the heat of the sun, and was a communal event for women. Yet she came alone in the middle of the day. What could that be saying about the woman.

Then a very odd thing, Jesus, a man and a faithful Jew not only speaks to her but asks her for water. First of all, a man should never be talking to a woman in public who he is not related too, and secondly, a Jewish man should not be asking a Samaritan woman for something which would be seen as lowering himself and demeaning himself. Yet a request for water in the near east was and is something that anyone would be expected to fulfill if it was in their power. And so she asks, 'how is that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan?'she was a bit shocked.

Then John uses one of his standby techniques which he used with Nicodemus last week (born again/born from above) – Jesus says something that the person doesn't really understand the way he means it. Jesus tells the woman that if she knew who she was talking to she would ask him for 'living water'. Now in the Greek 'living water' could also mean 'running water', like from a stream or spring. She asks him what he has to draw with from the well, and if he is greater than Jacob who gave them this well – an appeal to Samaritan genealogy and connection with one of the great patriarchs. This was a bit of a sly challenge.

Jesus tells her that people who drink from this well will thirst again, but not if they drink of the water he will give. Again, reminiscences of a higher understanding like with Nicodemus last week. She, being very tired

of hauling water, says 'please, give me this water!'. He asks her to go call her husband and bring him here. She answers that she has no husband, but Jesus counters that she has had 5 husbands and the one she is with now is not her husband. Aha! The plot thickens. What is this telling about the woman at the well. Does this give some insight why she might have come alone in the middle of the day?

I think most of the time we immediately leap to some conclusion about the reputation of the woman. We maybe think she has divorced 5 men because she is willful and wanton, but remember, women could not divorce their husbands, only men could divorce their wives, and could do so for any reason they wanted by giving them a certificate of divorce. Maybe she had been mistreated by 5 men, maybe she was handicapped in some way, or otherwise not liked or trusted, and men just used her until something better came along. Maybe this was why she was at the well alone in the middle of the day....feeling somewhat ostracized by the other women.

She responds....'uh, sir , I perceive you are a prophet'. It is clear that she understands Jesus for who he is. But she is still perplexed why he, a Jew, is speaking to her. And so she challenges him with the age-old argument between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans believe that proper worship should take place on Mt. Gerazim which was nearby – and something they could argue from part of the Pentateuch, but Jews believe that worship should properly take place on Mt. Zion – a hill in Jerusalem. Mt. Zion and all that is associated with correct worship of God being located in that place is of course where we get the name used so often in hymns as God's holy place and where the modern state of Israel gets the term for their movement: Zionism.

For Christians, 'Zion', becomes a spiritual metaphor. And so for Jesus in his words to this woman, 'the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father....But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in

spirit and in truth...God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

The rest of the story is of the woman going to tell her fellow Samaritans and bringing them to Jesus; and of the disciples getting his lecture on the spiritual harvest and being part of it, whether sower or reaper. And this, of course, in Samaria. And did you notice what the Samaritans said at the end: we no longer believe because of what you told us, we believe because we have experienced you (Jesus) ourselves. THERE is a message for Lent!

Well, have you met him at the well? Under this sign of water we hear of living water that will quench us for life. John’s story here firmly cements the fact that Jesus’ mission is not just for faithful Jews – the living water starts to be a message for the known world – even those we think most despicable. And people, ‘the harvest’, are thirsty for it everywhere.

So, remembering your happy experience of water, can you share that with others? Can you, like the Samaritan woman, suddenly wake up to the power of living water. Maybe, at baptism, we should also ask people to drink a little of the water and tell them that this living water will quench their thirst for life! Our baptism is a washing, yes; and an initiation into Christian community, yes; but it is also a commissioning to go into the harvest and share this happy water, this water of life with everyone.

And take heart! For those of us who believe, the message about Mt. Gerazim or Mt. Zion reminds us that it is not the place that is important, rather the relationship with the one who can tell you everything you have ever done and invites you into the Beloved Community.