

“QUENCHING OUR THIRST”

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

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It is all about water. Every morning the thing that fully wakes me up is the comfort of a warm shower. One of the first things hospitals teach new parents is how to bathe their newborn child. One of the first events in Jesus' life that we learn about is his baptism. And, of course, every summer the thing that makes summer complete is cutting through a wake while waterskiing, ever knowing that I am an inch or two from meeting the water face first. It really is all about water—a scarce resource that brings life to the world, brings growth and joy, and becomes a symbol of faith and life in the church.

Water is everywhere in our scripture lessons for today. In the reading from the Hebrew bible, the people of Israel lift up complaints against Moses and, indirectly, against God for their lack of water. In the gospel reading for today, water also plays a primary role; but in this instance, it is both the tangible thing that cools the body and a device used by Jesus to illustrate openness and a relationship to a God who transforms and liberates. For Moses, and for Jesus and the woman of Samaria, water is at the center of the discussion and at the center of growing faith.

Now as you know, I did my growing up in eastern Washington where water has always been something of a central focus. How is the snow pack this year? Did we get enough rain? Is there going to be enough water in the reservoirs so that we can use it to sell electricity to neighboring states? Will it be a bad fire year? Are the lakes going to stay full enough and cool enough so that the algae growths won't take over? Is it water ski season yet? Why can't California get their own water? They won't really divert the Columbia, will they?

None of these questions figure into our scripture reading today; but they illustrate how water is a commodity in our culture and how we have moved beyond the essence of water to, instead, focus on its value. Clean water, oil, technology, food—all these are commodities that have caused a great deal of strife and concern of late as global economists and ecologists have sounded alerts describing dire circumstances regarding the world's consumption of these valuable resources. As global citizens, how we use our resources is constantly called into question as we try to balance our needs with the needs of the rest of the world. Water equals power for us today and, in a strange way, it did in our lessons for today.

Putting aside our global resource issues, our scripture lessons focus upon water as a resource for faith. Our scripture reading from Exodus is about the questions and doubts that the Israelites had as they followed Moses. Now remember, this passage comes only a few short verses after God has offered sustenance to the Israelites through manna from the heavens; but seemingly the Israelites have a short memory. For when they came to Rephidim, their thirst became so unbearable that they were overwhelmed and filled with despair, doubt, and anger. And there was Moses, the man who had led them safely thus; but now he was simply one man faced with an

angry crowd of people who were very quickly turning on him, and so he again asked God for help. And once again God showed that he would not abandon his people. And after they had their water, Moses lets them know how childish they had been in their doubting, for he chides the Israelites with these words, “Is the Lord among you or not?”

Now, I don’t think that it is always best to try to strike back at ungratefulness; sometimes such behavior is best left ignored. Sometimes we simply have to wallow in our self-pity long enough to realize how blessed we really are. It is a balance, really. I am certainly glad I don’t have someone pointing out all of my selfish and ungrateful moments; but I know that we all have people in our life who hold us accountable. For Israel, Moses was that person. In this instance, he stands awash in the blessings that God has again provided and rather than simply letting Israel drink their water, Moses again reminds them of where it came from. And as he does this, he reminds them again of their unwillingness to fully trust in God. How much manna had they just consumed? How many of them had survived their long journey? Had they really ever been forgotten by God?

But from this ancient text we run directly into one of the greatest problems of human nature. We, like the Israelites that Moses was leading, have short memories; well, at least we have short memories when it comes to the good things that happen in our lives. And so it didn’t really matter how long ago the Israelites had feasted on manna, because all they knew was at that moment they were thirsty, and somebody was going to hear about it. And so they confronted Moses; and, filled with fear, he turned to God. What Israel was really saying to Moses was, “What have you done for me lately?” It is a familiar attitude really. This attitude easily finds its way into our lives as we evaluate those around us: our friends, how long since they have called us?; our bosses, how long since they have acknowledged our contributions?; our neighbors, are they ever going to move that garbage can in from the curb?; our politicians, are you better off now than a year ago? Have they forgotten about us? These are the questions of our time, but they are not so different from the attitude of those who nearly rose up against Moses.

And that is why the gospel story is so dramatic. Instead of being a story of how things should have been, Jesus turns convention on its ear. Jesus, the Jew, takes what should have been an interaction based on generations of hatred and, instead, turns it into a moment of redemption and inclusion. And all simply by asking for a drink of water. Let’s look at who the woman was. That woman at the well was despised by her village, which was despised by Judeans, whose ancestors had been humiliated by Babylonians. From generation to generation, humiliation, resentment, and violence were passed down by people keeping score so they could seek to even it. But wait, Jesus sets aside all score-keeping, and instead asks for what he needs most—a drink of water.

And then the conversation takes place: the woman asking why he would ask her for water, and Jesus offers her so much more than ordinary water. In this conversation the water becomes nothing more than a pretext for Jesus to introduce himself and to invite the Samaritan woman into the fold. Several things are important about this interaction. First, this is the longest conversation that Jesus has with anyone in the Bible; and it is not with a disciple or one of those

closest to him. Instead, it is with someone whose ethnicity, gender, and marital status should have precluded her from even talking to Jesus. But those things simply did not matter. This speaks clearly about the inclusive nature of the ministry of Jesus—not only did he seek to include people, but he would even include a woman of Samaria—a woman who had many strikes against her.

Secondly, this interaction provides an opportunity for Jesus to again instruct the disciples concerning the true nature of his ministry and mission. Still they don't seem to get it. "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you don't know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" The mystical Jesus who brings spiritual food and water is completely misunderstood by those who are supposedly closest to him. But the Samaritan woman stands in contrast to the disciples who were off tending to the needs of the human body at the same time that Jesus was conveying a new truth and new reality to one who had no reason to expect an invitation. After her conversation with Jesus, that woman of Samaria—the one who is disregarded by so many—goes off and shares the story of Jesus. Eventually the disciples, too, will tell the stories; but for now, they are still stuck with the realities they can see and touch and feel.

And so that is where we reside today: stuck in a world desperately seeking rational explanations for everything, yet called by God to follow in the footsteps of an unprovable Messiah who lived long ago. What are we to believe? How are we to act?

One sows, while another reaps. Two thousand years later we are in line to continue reaping the benefits of the Samaritan woman's conversation with Jesus. The living water that Jesus offered to the Samaritan women is still bubbling up for us. It is bubbling up in exciting ways as our denominational branding campaign spreads the good news of Jesus' welcome, justice and compassion. It is bubbling up as our youth prepare to help children in Mexico City. It is bubbling up as denomination borders fall to celebrate the World Day of Prayer.

I'll be honest. When I see water I will always ask if it is deep enough so I can water ski on it. But even with the myopic view of a desperate waterskier, I know that we are all thirsty for that miraculous water that Jesus offered to the Samaritan woman. It is there for all of us. . .the warm and magnanimous welcome from Jesus assures that; but the trick, I think, is to make sure we don't make that water a commodity that is given only to some; that we don't write ourselves out of the picture as unworthy; that we don't exclude anyone from quenching their thirst on the living water of Christ. Come, quench your thirst; come, bring your friends; bring those who are not friends. It flows freely; drink of it. Thanks be to God. Amen.