

Well Water
John 4: 5-42
Exodus 17: 1-7

Both of my parents were born and grew up in small coal-mining towns in central Pennsylvania, about twenty miles north of State College, where Penn State is located. After they were married they moved to New Jersey and I grew up there in a suburban town in Camden County.

Two or three times a year we would drive “up to Pennsylvania” to visit relatives. In the 1950s that was a long six or seven hour trip: through Camden and Philadelphia, up the newly constructed Schuylkill Expressway to the Pennsylvania Turnpike as far as Harrisburg. From then on it was winding two-lane roads up and down through woodlands and countryside and small farming towns.

I remember that after crossing the river at Harrisburg we followed the signs for Lewistown. Almost always, at the top of the Lewistown Mountain, my father would pull off the road to make a special stop.

Pouring out of an opening in a huge rock wall was water from a natural spring. Over and over, we would fill paper cups with the cool, fresh water; sometimes we filled a jug and took it along with us for the rest of the trip. That mountain water, coming from deep within the wellsprings of the earth, was the best – clear and refreshing, pure, unprocessed - and free.

Sometimes it seemed like we didn’t know how thirsty we were until we saw that water flowing freely from the rock. And then we couldn’t get enough.

This is the image that comes into my head as I hear again the readings for today.

The ancient Israelites continue to make their way through the desert. They're always finding something to murmur and grumble about, it seems. Now they're thirsty and there isn't any water to be had. They quarrel among themselves and complain to God through Moses. And we hear how God tells Moses to strike the rock with his staff and how water comes pouring out for the people to drink – clear and refreshing water, pure, unprocessed and free.

Names have significance here. Moses gives the place where this event happens two new names: Massah, which means 'test' and Meribah, which means 'quarrel.' This is the place where the people of Israel – which itself means 'struggle' – quarreled and tested God. This is where they asked, *"Is the Lord among us or not?"*

What a heart-wrenching question! How often we ask ourselves that same thing, though. We struggle in life; we complain; we try to test to see if God is still around to take care of us. Especially we might be doing so in Lent, these forty days in our own wilderness places, days of reflection, contemplation, searching. "Is the Lord with me or not?" is the question of a spiritually thirsty person.

And out of the deep wellspring of the earth and out of the deep wellspring of love for his people, God causes the water to come. The people may not even have known how really thirsty –spiritually thirsty - they were until they saw that water flowing freely from the rock, for then their question was answered: Yes, God is indeed among us.

The woman at the well is another story of spiritual thirst.

The well itself is an ancient site, dating back to the beginning of the nation Israel, before the Exodus, before Moses. It was on a plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. God had been providing water for his people from this well for a long, long time.

Over all this time, though, things had changed in Israel. The people are settled – or resettled – in Jerusalem. Religious customs and traditions have been built up over time. There is right practice, orthodoxy.

The woman at the well is unorthodox. She is an outsider and triply so:

- A Samaritan: an outcast as far as other Jews were concerned. (*Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans and they did not worship in the same holy place.*)
- A woman: women had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially by holy men.
- A person of questionable reputation, as we learn when she and Jesus converse. Respectable women made their trips to the well in the morning, when they could greet one another and talk. But this woman was one of the ones they talked about, and the fact that she showed up at noon was a sure sign she was not welcome at their morning social hour. (Taylor 19)

Yes, the Samaritan woman is unorthodox. Yet it is her particular situation that causes her mind and heart to be open and ready to receive any words of acceptance and inclusion, any words of hope that mean her life is worth something to God. She knows how spiritually thirsty she is and in her own way, in her time, she is testing to see if God is with her.

For Jesus' part, she is just the kind of one he seeks after, the kind of one whose thirst he knows only God can quench – and she knows it too.

For their ancestors, the ancient Israelites, the water from the rock was a symbol of God's continuing presence. But now ordinary drinking water, from the well, does not carry that symbolism. The water from the well will not suffice.

It is only living water from the spiritual wellspring of God that will fill this woman's thirst – clear, pure, fresh and free. Jesus is that living water. Water from the rock of our salvation. He speaks to her:

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

“...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

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

Maybe, in fact, this Samaritan woman didn't know how spiritually thirsty she really was until her conversation with Jesus. She drank in his words and the Spirit overflowed from within her. *She returned to the city and proclaimed what she had experienced. And many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony.*

Any day of your life, you may find yourself at the well. For some reason you're feeling like that Samaritan woman, an outsider, and oh so thirsty in your soul. Jesus is waiting for you. In fact, Jesus is especially ready to welcome and receive you. Throughout the gospels, Jesus got into all manner of trouble for spending so much time with outsiders – the

uninformed, the uncommitted, the marginalized, ones that others would call sinners.

I like to think of the church as the well. We come here thirsty. We find here what we expect to find – the waters of history and tradition, rituals and teaching, mission and outreach and service. Waters that we love to drink, waters full of meaning that help sustain our faith and keep it going.

But if we do not meet Jesus here at this well – all of us, outsiders and insiders alike - the church will have failed. For only Jesus is the living water that flows from the spiritual wellspring of God – clear, pure, fresh and free.

Do you know how spiritually thirsty you are?

Sometimes we do not know until we feel that water flowing freely over us and filling us from the rock of our salvation. And then, I pray, we cannot get enough.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. “Reflections on the lectionary.” *Christian Century*. 12 Feb. 2008: 19.

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