

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

Thirst  
March 23, 2014  
Mary R. Brownlow

There are a lot of thirsty people in our Scripture readings today! Everybody is preoccupied with water. And no wonder: for most of human history, finding enough clean water to drink and to use for a household would have been a major concern, a life and death question. Thirst is a sensation we can all understand, and one which we share with animals, like the deer longing for flowing streams. Thirst begins at the cellular level, as these small components of life strive to keep fluid in balance. When the cells begin to sense a threat to that balance, when osmolites, like salt, increase in concentration, they send messages to the brain and say, "Give me water!" And our brains send us that distinctive sensation. I'm not a scientist, but that is how I understand our bodies work. (By the way, I have extra bottled water here if I am provoking any discomfort by talking about this.)

As always though, our Scriptures take something that is a common shared physical experience - like shining light, or warm fire, or nourishing bread – and lead us to think about relationships, both with the divine and with each other. So, the thirsty Hebrews in the desert are teaching us something about human nature, and about dependence on and trust in God. And maybe that story also teaches us about how exasperated religious leaders can get with their flock. The thirsty Psalmist teaches us about need and a sense of abandonment, and, once again, the virtues of hope and trust in God. And the Gospel reading, that strange, light-hearted, profound, and unlikely meeting of thirsty Jesus and the Samaritan woman, gives us...well, that's the question, isn't it? What did you get from overhearing that conversation at the well?

The writer of the Gospel of John loves this kind of encounter: Jesus having it out, one-on-one with a variety of people. Last week, the well-respected Jewish leader Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to have a theological discussion. This week is a noonday conversation with a despised foreigner. Next week, Jesus will talk with a man who was born blind and regains his sight. Last week, Nicodemus ended his inquiries with "How can these things be?" and we wonder whether he really heard Jesus at all. This week, in the long series of questions and answers by the side of a well, we get a sense of real receptivity and engagement on the part of this woman. A sense of thirst and a sense of slaked thirst.

Maybe the difference between last week's Nicodemus and this week's Samaritan woman is the quality of their thirst, their need. Nicodemus, with his position and wealth and education, had everything to lose by engaging with, siding with, following Jesus. The woman at the well – what did she have to lose? She was doing her own heavy lifting. She was not so respectable. With a good listener, she could be honest about her need. When the subject turns to what Jesus has to offer, she can be eager in her response. From her lips come the existential question that echoes through the story: What do you do when you're thirsty, and you have no bucket, and the well is deep?

What struck me this week in reading this story was where thirst starts: it is Jesus who is weary, weary enough to sit right down, alone, by the well. It is Jesus who names need first: "Give me a drink of water." With that one request, he opens the floodgates of curiosity, empathy, shared experience, affirmation, and enthusiasm. It is almost as if he is starting at the cellular level, signaling an internal imbalance, whether in the human condition or the social order, and communicating, through his own need, thirst for the water of life. His need unlocks her need, which in turn gives her the freedom to speak, to share, and later, to run down to the town to say, "Come and see this man."

The weary Jesus needs to drink fresh, clean water to stay alive. The woman also needs to drink: she needs the fresh clean grace and truth and affirmation and enthusiasm that is offered by the thirsty prophet/Messiah. She needs healing and a sense of wholeness. At some cellular level, her life is out of balance too. At the well, mutual humanity is affirmed. The thirst for relationship is noted and addressed. Boundaries, customs, prejudice, fear are washed away. Together they can contemplate the problem: What do you do when you're thirsty, and you have no bucket, and the well is deep?

At the side of a well, at noon, there are no ambiguous shadows. Distractions are cleared away and in the bright sunlight strangers can speak of need and thirst and true worship. Face to face, people who should be suspicious become open; people who should be enemies are theological partners; people who should be distant are related. The world looks new, in that kind of sunlight.

Please note that, although Jesus talks about her marital life, there is no word of judgment or sin. There is no requirement that she change her ways before she takes any other action. Please note that her statement of faith after she runs down the hill – "This man told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" – is not exactly the Nicene Creed. But it is enough, enough to make her an effective witness – some have called her the first Apostle. Just as Jesus' conversation was an invitation, not a judgment, so her words to the townspeople are compelling and refreshing in their enthusiasm.

We have to admit that we tend to distract ourselves from the thirst for living water with other thirsts. Some are fairly benign. There's the thirst for knowledge: even when writing this sermon, it was easy for me to get distracted by that kind of thirst. Where exactly on a map was this city in Samaria and this well? How far would Jesus have walked if his last stop were Jerusalem? When did people start calling Samaritans, Samaritans? When did worship begin on that mountain and what year was its temple destroyed? Believe me, I can get into that line of inquiry very easily. But the woman's question still hangs in the air: What do you do when you're thirsty, and you have no bucket, and the well is deep?

We have all stood there, next to a deep well, with no bucket, facing our need, another's need, any situation which seems beyond our human abilities. We are out of balance, our cells crying out for the water that will restore us to health and peace. How am I going to get to get all my work done? The well is deep and I have no bucket. How am I going to mend a relationship with a friend who is troubled or addicted? The well is deep and I have no bucket. How will I face the aging and death of loved ones? The well is deep and I have no bucket. How will we deal with the crisis in violence and poverty in our country? The well is deep and I have no bucket.

Sometimes I have wondered why people come to church on Sunday mornings - no, this is not me changing the subject. I am still talking about thirst. Do we want to be here, or do we need to be here? This is a delicate question. If we want to be here, we have chosen among a number of options – skiing, sleeping, reading – and coming to worship won out. And it is great to have options, and great that you are here. We freely chose, we freely worship, we enjoy the music, we enjoy each other's company, but...surely we are more than a group of well-intentioned people who like to gather. If we need to be here, then we are revealed, to ourselves if no one else, as needy, thirsty, wounded, or afraid. That question resonates with all too much intensity: What do you do when you're thirsty, and you have no bucket, and the well is deep? But it is that question that leads us to relationship, to deeper connection with the divine, to compassion and healing.

The Good News today is: Jesus met the woman at the well. And that encounter is the template for our spiritual life and our worship. As we stand next to the well in the noonday sun, we find that living water is very close in the form of questions, answers, challenge, and acceptance. We find in face- to-face meetings an acknowledgement of need and the encouragement of help. We find that one person has thirst and another has a water jar. We find that people who previously shared nothing in common with strangers can share a sip of water and conversation. We do not ask, "How can these things be?" We open our ears and eyes and hearts with understanding and pray, "Lord, give me this water!"

Jesus and the Samaritan woman were engaged in a kind of counter-cultural conspiracy. They really stepped outside the bounds of normal and safe. The Good News today is: Jesus met the woman at the well. They conspired to admit thirst, in spite of all the reasons not to. They conspired to offer water, in spite of all the reasons not to. They conspired to share a spring of water, gushing up to eternal life, in the face of improbability. May we join in their conspiracy, so that we can all taste that freshness, that solace, that sweet deep drink. Amen.