

Sunday, March 12, 2023  
The Third Sunday in Lent  
John 4:5-42

Imagine high noon in the rocky desert region of Samaria. The arid landscape is practically shimmering under the burning sun. Jesus and his disciples, tired and thirsty from the day's journey, stop outside the city of Sychar, a town approximately 31 miles from Jerusalem. While his disciples go into the city for food, Jesus takes a seat near the town's well.

As he waits, Jesus notices a woman emerge from the city gate. Alone, she makes her way to the well, carrying a large, earthenware jug balanced on her shoulder. Jesus knows what an odd sight this is. Ordinarily, women came to the well early in the morning, when the day was still cool, to draw the water needed for that day: for drinking, bathing, and washing dishes and clothing.

This unnamed woman supposedly has a "shady past." But instead of dwelling on that, let's do exactly what Jesus does in this story - let's encounter this woman at the well on her own terms, listen to her story, and let her tell us about her encounter with Jesus.

We meet this woman at a well. Wells are important places in the Bible. They often form the backdrop for stories. In the Hebrew Bible, wells are often a place of revelation, rich in spiritual and emotional meaning.

So let's travel together back to Samaria, to Jacob's well, and ask this nameless woman to tell us her story. If we could ask her, perhaps she would tell us about how a series of husbands had cast her off - which was easy for men to do in those days. Or maybe they all died. We just don't know. Maybe this woman would like to tell us what it's like to be a perpetual outsider; a marginalized woman in a marginalized people group - the Samaritans; a woman doubly excluded. Or she might have a few choice words to say about the women of the town, who fall silent and exchange meaningful glances when she comes around the corner. She might even tell us how one day she simply stopped trying to fit in and resigned herself to being the subject of everyone's gossip.

But then one day everything changed. That one day, when she went to draw water from Jacob's well, she discovered that she wasn't alone out there. There was someone waiting for her at the well - a dusty traveler, looking weary. His sandals and tunic were covered in brown dust, there was sweat on his brow, and he looked thirsty and very tired.

And then he spoke to her, which technically, he shouldn't have done at all - a Jew and a Samaritan, a man and a woman, all alone at the well. "Woman, give me a drink," he says.

Now to me, this is not a promising start to a conversation! But the meeting turns into quite a genuine encounter. The conversation that Jesus has with this unnamed woman at the well is the longest Jesus has with anyone, anywhere recorded in the gospels. As it turns out, both Jesus and the woman have plenty to reveal.

The woman comes to the well for water, surely one of the most important of her daily household tasks. But she is also emotionally thirsty for a genuine encounter. We see that from the way that she jumps into the conversation and easily enjoys the back-and-forth banter with this wandering prophet. Maybe it's the first time in a long time that someone has really seen her. Jesus encounters her with respect, listening carefully and taking her spiritual inquiries seriously.

She is spiritually thirsty. When she hears what Jesus is offering, she is instantly ready for the living waters he promises. She says, "Sir, give me this living water, that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

In this story, Jesus is thirsty too. His human nature is physically thirsty for a drink of water. But his divine nature is also thirsty - thirsty to share his identity, his Messiahship, and his living water. God's thirst, made visible in Jesus, is to share God's self with the people of the world.

Specifically, in this setting, Jesus is thirsty to reveal himself to the men and women who most need to hear the good news of reconciliation - in this case, the outcast Samaritans, long-separated from the Jews. This is the point of Jesus's emphasis, in this story, on his coming to bring reconciliation between Samaritans and Jews.

"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him."

Jesus thirsts for all people to be true worshippers of the Father. Jesus thirsts to share the secret of who he is with all people. And he chooses as his missionary to the Samaritans - of all people! - the woman at the well at noon.

One encounter changes everything. A woman with no known name and a tainted, hurtful past discovers that someone has "found" her, listened to her, spoke to her, and loved her. All of the secrets this woman had to hide were laid bare in the bright noonday sun. This well in the desert-at-noon on a hot day in Samaria becomes, for half an hour, a place of grace, where this woman's deepest spiritual and emotional thirsts are quenched in Jesus.

And Jesus, who thirsts to reveal who he is, has found another disciple. He has found in this woman someone with eyes to see and ears to hear - a woman ready to see God in him.

And so we gather together now, because we are disciples. We still believe in the promise of the living water that satisfies thirsty souls. This is the gurgling of the Spirit that, in the words of John, is "gushing up to eternal life."

We, like the Samaritan woman, have known what it means to be thirsty; and we, too, have encountered the One who offers us living water so satisfying that we will never thirst again. Amen