

LENT 3, Mar. 19, 2017, Year A

“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty...” (from John 4:5-42)

- The middle of the day brings with it *contrasts* – both *literally* and *figuratively*. When the bright sun shines directly *overhead*, distinct *shadows form* around us, leaving sharp lines between light and dark. *We often feel most-alive at mid-day*, when we’re involved with projects or work. *But at noontime, we can also be distracted by cares and concerns*, bigger than we can handle by ourselves. Milder than in some places, the noonday sun in Samaria can be demanding, causing people to seek shade where it might be found. Even livestock move to the shadows under low tree branches until the respite of early evening. Though relief might come from cool water, a walk to the well is usually postponed until the daytime heat has passed. Especially if one plans on carrying jars heavy with water back the house.
- In spite of this, *and in fact because of it*, she comes to the well at mid-day. *This way, she can mostly count on no one being here*. Back in ancient days, Jacob’s well was covered by a large rock. It was so large, it could only be lifted by several people working together. Therefore, *no one could come alone*, and take more than his or her fair share from the depths below. One could only satisfy a need for water in the presence of others, who would help lift the heavy stone cover. The Samaritan woman is glad it’s different now, *for she can come alone to draw from this deep well*.
- On one noonday visit, under the hot sun, she finds an unexpected stranger by the well. He appears tired, and asks for a drink. *She does not yet see how this moment connects with a larger pattern. He thirsts, just as he will thirst again on another hot noonday*. Both now and then, he thirsts as he does the work of his Father. Paradoxically, just as will happen on that later hot afternoon, he thirsts *while at the same offering living water* to those who need it. (pause)
- He seems to know more about her than she could ever have guessed. And his statements are *provocative*. Slowly, she discerns that he is saying something like this: “You have come here in the *safety* of noonday. For you assume *no one else* will be around, when you raise water from the depths of Jacob’s well. *Yet*,

you have a deep well within you. How far into the depths of your inner well, are you willing to go with me?"

- The woman at the well *does not* see something that escapes most of us, *as well*. That is, unless we are *persistent* and *perceptive* readers of John's Gospel, and remember the holy stories told in the older Scriptures. The Samaritan woman knows that the well is named for *Jacob*. But she does not see *the connection* between that earlier story and this moment. She is not yet aware that the stranger, having come to this well, is *like Jacob*. *As a new Jacob*, Jesus resembles their biblical forebear in several ways. *First*, like the earlier Jacob, he has come here to do the will of his father. *Second*, like their ancestor, he will *also* be called "Israel." And *third*, like the earlier Jacob, he comes to the well to find the one who will become the mother of his many children. This would be like Isaac, who found Rebecca at a well, and like Moses, who found Zipporah at a well. *Following this highly symbolic pattern, a new Jacob has come to a well in order to find "a bride" - not literally, but spiritually*. But this time, the new Jacob's bride will not be just one person. His bride will be called the Church, and the Church will become the mother of the new Israel.¹
- *In the meaningful imprecision of biblical poetry and metaphor, Jesus becomes a new Israel*. As a new Israel, and as a second Jacob, Jesus comes to the well to find his bride the Church. But here is the surprise: *the bride he finds at the well is a Samaritan woman, who already has had five husbands! In other words, he doesn't just find her; he finds you and me!* For, like her, *we would all* prefer to arrive at the well in *bright* mid-day light, because of the *dark anonymity* it affords. It matches the darkness we feel within. Imagine the surprise of seeing Jesus there, *and of being seen by him*. This helps us imagine the awkward moment experienced by the Samaritan woman. *For we have so often coupled ourselves with the idols of this world*. Therefore, we have to admit that we've had just as many false loves as her. Surely, having been wedded to idols, we are disqualified from becoming the bride of Christ.

LENT 3, Mar. 19, 2017, Year A

- *And so, we come to this well again.* We may come in a similar way, hoping to be spared from encountering others, and *that great Other*. That *Other* who asks questions, and who prompts us to plumb less comfortable depths. Like the well of Jacob, these *further depths* are also connected with thirst, and going down into them could aid our survival.
- *In just this moment, he appears, asking questions about what has become within us a well of grief.* He is *not* pointing to the well of Jacob, but to *the dark well of secrets within us*. He has in mind *our well of sadness* stemming from unfulfilled hopes, *and our regret* over what has become of our lives.
- *Often, we seek places where we can satisfy our needs through our own efforts.* There, Jesus may surprise us, by challenging us *to go deeper - to face the harder questions*. Have we come to church this morning, like this Samaritan woman has come to the well? Have we come thinking that, *here*, we can find a solution to our thirst, *but on our own terms*? And, *do we imagine* we'll avoid the light of accountability, shining all around us?
- In the midst of prompting these hard questions, *Jesus offers us living water! In the midst of inviting us to descend to the deepest and darkest places within our souls, he offers us the gift of light.* He offers to give (*what in us* will become) a gushing spring. It is the water of eternal life. *If only... if only we will slip down beneath the still surface of the black water, to the place we cannot breathe!*
- Many of us have already learned, in one way or another, a truth expressed by the Welsh poet *David Whyte*. It is in his poem, "*The Well of Grief*," a copy of which I have put with your worship bulletin this morning:

LENT 3, Mar. 19, 2017, Year A

Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface on the well of grief
turning downward through its black water
to the place we cannot breathe
will never know the source from which we drink,
the secret water, cold and clear,
nor find in the darkness glimmering
the small round coins
thrown away by those who wished for something else.²

- This 'secret' living water is found within. It is given to us by the one who meets us at the well. He thirsted for the water of this world, so that we might find the water of the next. He does not give water *in which we might play*, like children in a splash pool. He gives us the water of life, *living water*, which meets our deepest need.



James Tissot, *Samaritan Woman by the Well*

John 4:5-42 [NRSV]

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered 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." **The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"** Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

LENT 3, Mar. 19, 2017, Year A

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Notes:

¹ I wish to credit John Shea, and perhaps another source that presently escapes my memory, for the insight underlying this spiritual reading of John’s Gospel, 4:5-42. See John Shea, *On Earth As It Is In Heaven: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, Vol. 1, Year A (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2004), p. 116ff.

² David Whyte, “The well of grief.” From his website, <http://www.davidwhyte.com/#home>, accessed on 17March2017.