

Sermon, February 24, 2008, The Third Sunday in Lent
Calvary Episcopal Church, Underhill, VT

Readings:

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalms 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

John, the patron saint of evangelist and evangelism, made sure the story of "*the woman at the well*" was included and told in great detail for the readers of his gospel. Unlike so many other stories about the life and times of Jesus, John actually *pinpointed* where this story took place. It was as important the reader know the location, as it was the message of the story. Jesus was in Samaria on the very outskirts of the city of Sychar, *near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph*. Jacob had dug a well there which, centuries later, was still important to the lives of the people of Sychar. It was a place where the fabric of society (the women) in that region gathered every day.

Most Jews of the day avoided Samaritans and traveling through Samaria. The Samaritans were a mixed race of people, part Jewish, yet considered untouchable and unappreciated by many "pure" Jewish people and vice-versa. They went out of their way to avoid each other. Jewish travelers went way around Samaria and certainly did not include stops at Jacob's well where they were certain to bump into each other. But here was Jesus, seated at the well in the middle of the day, worn out from his journey; he had sent the rest of his Jewish friends into Sychar to buy some food.

There are many scholarly and spiritual questions and answers about why Jesus was out of his territory and seated at Jacob's well, where he was bound to encounter Samaritans. Did he take the short way to Jerusalem crossing Samaria on purpose? Was he seeking a shorter route to save time and energy, or did he have some purpose there. Was it divine intervention that led him there or just a weary traveler's impulse? Did he wish to take his message to a place where it would likely not be told or heard, or did he originally plan to just pass through? We don't know what he was thinking for certain.

In the end, however, all these things occurred: he shortened his route to Jerusalem (time was of the essence now), he revealed his purpose in being there (delivering his divine message among the Samaritan people there for two days), it seemed fairly obvious that he was led there by Spirit after-all, and he always considered and tended to the "least of society" whenever he could; in this case the people in the Sychar region of Samaria.

Jesus was hardly seated at the well long enough to figure out how to get a drink out of it when *the woman*, happened along. A mixed raced woman, living outside of the usual rhythm of the days and duties of the rest of her people, handed down through a succession of several men comes for her days ration of water from Jacob's well. John's carefully written account lends elegant details, which enlightens and tells the rest of the story as we hear it:

It was about noon when the woman appeared for her water. She was obviously avoiding stumbling upon people. People typically gathered their water for the day very early in the morning, allowing them to drink, cook, bathe, and get on with their day's events, not to mention it was a much cooler time of day. It was most often women who sought out and hauled their family's water. They probably socialized a bit, exchanging

news and gossip, admiring each other's children who tagged along. The lone woman at the well may have often been the subject of their gossip.

Jesus' friend appears alone, at noon, with only one bucket (water for one or two)...her day has yet to really begin fully, but her life is about to change forever.

So imagine her surprise when she sees a strange man sitting beside the well, all alone. She may have been frightened, but she really needed water, or she may have turned back. He could be anyone, but when he lifts his head and asks her for a drink, she sees his olive complexion, his dark eyes, the strong brow and nose. The man is a Jew and not a person of mixed race. What in the world is he doing there and why did he speak to her?

*"My good woman, would you draw me a drink of water?" Lowering her bucket into the well and careful to not look into his eyes she says, "You, a high-and-mighty Jewish man want **me** a no-count Samaritan woman to give you a drink, from **this** well and **my** bucket? Are you out of your mind, has the heat gotten to you. That would be a gift from heaven for sure!"*

*"If you knew anything about "the gifts from God" and anything about me other than that which you assume, you would be given something more precious than **this** water in **your** bucket from **your** well."*

"Well sir, you don't even have a bucket, and there's no other water around here but what's way down there.....there is not a river or stream within miles of here, no other water has ever lived around here, only the water in this well; if not for it, we would not live. Jacob knew a long time ago what was needed for all of us live around here....this water, from this well.

*"You make your point well, my Samaritan friend. But in order to live around here, as you and the others do, you have to **come back** to the well, each and every day. I can give water that gushes up like a spring wherever you and the others stand, it will always be there, no more thirst...forever. No more buckets, no more hauling water, no more avoiding people.....just reach out and drink."*

"I like the sound of that Sir, give me that kind of water any day. Quenching my thirst wherever and whenever I like, and I wouldn't have to come here to this place and this well anymore; now that's my kind of water. Give me that water Sir, and I will be forever yours....I'll even throw in this nice bucket....just show me the water!"

"First, you had better go and tell your husband, or perhaps your companion.

"I have no husband."

"I know, and the man whom you draw water for is not counted among the other five husbands you have had."

“So the thirsty Jewish traveler is a prophet! So tell me prophet, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim where our ancestors worshiped?”

*“This argument, where is the correct place and way to worship, will be passed on through the ages, for certain. But believe me, dear woman, the time will come when it will finally no longer matter whether we worship the Father on this mountain or in the holy city. It’s a matter of **what** the people worship. We are all God’s people and we should turn to him, not to the things and idols of this world. The One who came to recover God’s people from this world is born through the house of David, the great King of the Jews, so salvation will come through them. My point I wish to make, wherever I go and speak is this: worship your God with all your heart wherever you find Him and you are a true worshiper.” The Father will seek out and listen to those who call on him in love and need. God is Spirit, God is everywhere for every person, and within that truth one may worship.”*

*“Indeed, prophet of the Jews, I have read the ancient scriptures and others who have traveled near our fair city have mentioned the One born of the House of David...I know that the Messiah, the Christ is coming. When he comes I hope he comes to us, perhaps even here at this well built by his own ancestor; **he will explain** all we sense in our hearts and what we think we know in our heads, he will explain everything to us, once and for all!”*

“I have explained it to you this fine day, my dear. I Am that One. I Am the Messiah you await.”

Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well is longer than any other recorded in all the Gospels. Longer than any conversation he has with any of his disciples, longer than any with his accusers at his trial, longer than any with his own family. She is the first person he reveals himself as the Messiah to in the Gospel of John. She is the first outsider to guess who he is and is allowed tell others. She is the first evangelist, John tells us, and her discovery of Christ and testimony brings many to faith. That’s why John included the story in such detail.

Beyond the grace in being able to read and listen in on this great conversation is the message that the least of society, anyone who is suffering for that matter, is often the one who leads others to their true rescue on this earth: *a life in conversation with God...and the graceful hope that others will listen in and perhaps join the conversation.* By telling the woman who **she** is, Jesus tells her who **he** is. By confirming her true identity (one of God’s beloved) he reveals his own identity (as the one who loves us) and that is how it still happens today.

In those moments we call on God, (and all the people do), it is in God’s presence we know who we really are: people with everyday tasks, joys and sorrows, needs and wishes, disappointing failures, broken hearts, hope and faith.....struggling to love one another.

Christ came to show us who we are by showing us who he is: The God who crosses all boundaries, breaks all the rules of this world, drops all disguises washes away the worshiper's façade; speaking to us like someone we have known all our life, springing up out of nowhere right where one stands.

Then we go back. We return to face the people and days of our lives we thought we could no longer deal with, not even for one more day, hauling around our little buckets of worry and broken dreams, talking to God, even if God has been a stranger to you for a while. Talking with God will send you on your way to face your troubles speaking to them as honestly and calmly (and quietly) as he spoke to you.

Sooner or later everyone seeks out God, perhaps without their knowing: "they pray the prayer," they bump into the One who told them everything they have ever done, suddenly they sing a new song, they come into his presence with thanksgiving.....they have worshiped....and their thirst is somehow.....quenched.