

Exodus 17: 1-7

17 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah^[a] and Meribah,^[b] because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

John 4: 3-30, 39-42

³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴ But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ 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.)^[b] ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you^[c] say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ 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. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵ 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.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he,^[d] the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷ 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?” ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah,^[e] can he?” ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² 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.”

Today, we continue our Lenten sermon series, Being Human. Lent is a time when we prepare ourselves to remember Jesus’ death and celebrate his resurrection, as well as confront our own humanity – our mortality and sinfulness. Each week, then, we are focusing on a different aspect of our humanity in our journey to follow Jesus to the cross. Today, we are thinking about thirst.

I don’t know about you, but physical thirst is something that I can’t say I have every really experienced. And yet, worldwide, lack of clean drinking water, and the diseases associated with not having clean water, kills more people than anything else. A whole lot of people die of thirst everyday. Nearly 10% of the world’s population lacks clean drinking water.

In our Old Testament reading, the Hebrew people were experiencing physical thirst. In fact, their thirst was so bad, they said they preferred slavery than thirst – they wanted to go back to Egypt. The text is not terribly kind to the Hebrew people. It says they tested the Lord by demanding that God through Moses provide them water. Moses was exasperated by their complaints (as he often was). And yet, I have to say that it seems to me their complaint is valid. Without water, they will die. God had promised to provide for them and they are holding God to God’s promise.

And God does indeed provide. The people have water to drink. And I would argue that God continues to provide today. Clean drinking water is actually not a hard problem to solve. There’s an advocacy group called Advent conspiracy and they’ve figured out that if Americans spent a small fraction to provide infrastructure for clean drinking water of what we spend every year at Christmas on presents, we could provide sustainable, clean drinking water for every person on the planet – we could end the thing that causes more death than anything else, we could provide over 600 million people and hundreds of millions of children with good, clean water to drink.

In the passage in Exodus the people grumbled against God, but, I wonder if today, if God is the one quarrelling and grumbling with us, saying, "I provided you a planet that can provide enough water for everyone. Why haven't you made sure that all people have access to it?"

That's not necessarily an easy thought to ponder, but it's exactly what we should be pondering during Lent. You see, Lent is not about thinking about all the individual wrongs we have committed, but rather at Lent, we are called to be mindful of those who suffer. We are called to be mindful of the ways that we are complicit in their suffering. There are a lot of thirsty people in the world – from now on, whenever we take a sip of water, may we remember them. And may we act, just as God did, to make sure no one is thirsty ever again.

But like Scripture does with many images, the images of thirst that we find in Scripture are not just literal. In our gospel passage, thirst serves as a metaphor. Jesus is travelling through a Samaritan village, which most Jewish people of the time would have walked miles out of the way to avoid. He sits down at the center of the town by the well when he meets this woman. First, she thinks she will be alone – the other women would have come out at dawn to draw water for the day, but she comes at noon. She wanted to be alone. We will soon find out the reason.

But before that, Jesus asks her for a drink and she is shocked – it was against custom for a man to speak in public to a woman who wasn't his wife and it was against custom for a Jew to speak to a Samaritan. The woman points that out, and then the conversation turns theological. Jesus tells her he has living water and that those who drink of this water will never thirst. That sounds good to the woman, so she asks for it. And then Jesus names her greatest thirst: "Go call your husband and come back."

We learn that she has had 5 husbands and is living with a man who is not her husband. It's easy to read this story as Jesus offering mercy to a sinful woman. But that interpretation completely misses the context. In that culture at that time, women did not choose who they would marry or if they would remain married or if they would get divorced. They were told who they would marry. Men could divorce women but women couldn't divorce men. This woman wasn't a failure in her ability to be in a relationship. Rather, she was property that had been passed around time and again. When Jesus asks her to call her husband, he is not naming the place of her sin. He is naming the place of her pain. Time and again, she had been given to a man only to later be cast aside. And not only was she rejected by the men in her life, it seems she was rejected by the whole community. She either was not welcome to draw water with the other women at dawn or she found it easier to come alone when she didn't have to deal with the whispers and stares.

By asking her to call her husband, Jesus was in essence saying, Let me love you in the place of your deepest pain. Then, the woman responds with what is in essence her statement of faith. *"I know that Messiah is coming," she says, "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."*

Notice how with everything she had experienced...all the trauma, all the shaming, she has hope that one will come and said things right – for her people, yes, but for her specifically. This person who had so many people against her that she wouldn't dare come to the well at the time when others would be there, somehow trusted that God was still on her side.

And Jesus confirmed for her that she was absolutely right. He said *"I am he,^[d] I am the Messiah."* When all others saw this woman as one to be shunned, as an outcast, as a sinner, Jesus named her as whole, as beloved. Notice that Jesus didn't say, "Well, when you get your life together, then I'll give you living water." Or "When people think better of you, then I'll give you living water." Or "When you start living in a more socially acceptable manner, then I'll give you living water."

No, Jesus said, I'm your Messiah right now. I'm your living water right now. I want to love you in the places of your deepest pain, of your deepest rejection.

And she is transformed. She goes and tells her whole community about Jesus. A few minutes before, she was an exile in her own community and now she is that community's preacher – bringing the whole town to faith in Jesus. She truly had found living water – she had been restored to community. She had been loved for who she was. Her thirst was quenched.

And I would argue that Jesus offers the same thing to us. Jesus wants to meet us in our places of pain, in our places of shame, and in our places where we have been hurt.

I want to invite you to consider what Jesus might say to you if he were to find you beside the well where he found the Samaritan woman. To explore that, we will end this sermon with a time of prayer and meditation.

First, what would Jesus say to you if he met you by the well. What is your deepest pain that Jesus would name? What is your place of deep thirst for which Jesus would offer living water? Let Jesus love you in that place.

Now, just as the woman in turn offered that living water to her whole community, who will you share it with? Who in your community needs love? Who in your community needs acceptance? Who in your community needs grace? How will you help quench their thirst?

And finally, will you pray for those who are literally dying of thirst? Will you become more aware of their pain and in response, how will you act, to make sure that every human being has clean water to drink?

In the name of Jesus, the source of living water, we pray. Amen.