

## Dying of Thirst

Scriptures: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95:1-5; John 4:1-14

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March 27, 2022

We can live without many things, including food, for a long time, but we cannot live without water. We must have fluids to hydrate our body. We have the sensation of thirst to serve as a reminder that it is time for fluids. It has always been so, and this morning was read the story of how desperate the Hebrews were for water as they were led through the desert by Moses. That story from the desert describes how God used Moses to be the hand of God to provide water flowing from the rock. It is a story of God providing living water to those in the desert. God had gone before Moses and the elders to meet them at the rock from which the water would flow.

The story that was read about Jesus and the woman sounds in some ways like the rehearsal of a simple event in the life of Jesus, but it is anything but simple. Some context in which the event in Samaria happened: The area known as Samaria was located between Jerusalem and Galilee. When the nation of Israel was invaded by Babylon and carried into exile, King Nebuchadnezzar

- took the treasures from the Temple,
- took the king and his wives, and the queen mother,
- carried back to Babylon 10,000 captives from Jerusalem.

These captives included:

- all of the princes and leaders,
- 7,000 of the best of the soldiers,
- 1,000 craftsmen gold and silver smiths.

So only the poorest and least skilled people were left in the land. There was no Temple outfitted for worship. There was no spiritual leadership. The people of Jerusalem were basically gone. The city was no more a city. The people lived without certainty or purpose. The people of Samaria set up a place of worship in the mountains outside of Jerusalem. They began to intermarry with non-Jews.

Decades later, when Persia conquered Babylon, all of the Jews who wished to do so were allowed to return to Israel. Those who returned somehow saw themselves as superior to those who were still in the land.

Those who had remained in the land of Israel and lived in the area between Jerusalem and Galilee became known as Samaritans. They were considered as unclean; in the vernacular, as "half-breeds." The Jews decided to have "no dealings" with the Samaritans. Even after the Temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem, the Samaritans were permitted only in the outer Court of the Gentiles. A wall separated them from the next partition, which admitted Jewish women.

A ritually clean Jew who was traveling between Jerusalem and the Galilee area would cross over the Jordan River to the other side to keep from even walking through Samaria.

There was a religious caste system. To the dismay of the Pharisees, Jesus had no hesitancy about socializing with sinners or even Samaritans. Jesus touched or was touched by the "unclean"; those with

leprosy, the deformed, a hemorrhaging woman, the mentally ill. He touched many sick people and never considered Himself defiled. Jesus turned upside down the accepted wisdom of the day.

As Jesus traveled north out of Jerusalem on his way back to Galilee, He walked along the road that led through Samaria. He needed to go through Samaria. He did not cross over the Jordan. He "had" to go through Samaria. Jesus had business to do in Samaria, not because He could not have crossed over the Jordan River, but because he had "grace business" to do with a people in Samaria. Jesus had a divine appointment with an unsuspecting woman.

Being tired, He sat himself down by the well that Jacob had dug centuries ago. (That well is still there today. Water still flows in that well.) It was there that Jesus would meet with and change the life of a woman forever in Sychar. It is noon and the disciples go into the town of Sychar to buy some food for them to eat. Jesus sits alone at the well. Waiting.

Most of the women of the village would have come to the well in the cool of the early morning for the day's water supply. Coming to the well was more than just a matter of getting water. It was a social occasion. It was when they spent time

- talking about their children,
- sharing family stories,
- gossiping about anyone who wasn't there.

For whatever reason, the woman that Jesus is to meet wasn't there this morning. She comes to the well in the heat of the noonday to draw water for her household. To her surprise she finds a Man sitting by the well,

- a Man who is a Jew in the Samaritan area,
- a Man who, to her amazement, speaks to her,
- a Man who asks her for a drink of water.

The woman responds to the request of Jesus with amazement because He has just violated two social conventions:

FIRST: A Jewish man did not engage in public conversation with an unknown woman.

SECOND: Jews did not invite contact with Samaritans. The fear of ritual contamination had developed into a prohibition of all social contact.

But Jesus has stopped at this well on purpose. He has been waiting for this woman who will recognize Him as the promised Messiah, and will then bring the people of Sychar who are despised by the Jews to also recognize Him. This Man tells her things about herself that only the Messiah could know. This Man offers to give her "living water."

What is this "living water?"

"Living water" is a phrase that is found throughout the Bible. God is referred to as the "spring of living water." (Jeremiah 2:13) In another reference, Jesus refers again to himself as the source of living water. (John 7:37-39)

Living water was the water that continually flowed. There was an unlimited source of that water. Living water was a reference to the Spirit of God that those who believed in Him would receive.

This living water:

- will satisfy the thirst within her soul;
- will assure her that she is a person of worth and significance and value to God;
- will sustain her in the challenges of living.

Let's look at what Jesus doesn't do.

Jesus doesn't argue with her about where she should worship. That's not why He came to town. He reveals to her that He is the Messiah for whom she and her people have waited.

He doesn't judge her because of her marital status. It is important that we do not read something into the story that isn't there. We get into difficulty when we read the stories in the Scriptures with a Western interpretation. We need to read them in the setting in which they were written.

It reads as though this woman was trapped in the custom that was known as Levirate marriage. It was a cultural custom of the Jews in that age. It is still practiced by some Orthodox Jews until this day. The nation of Israel today has laws governing this kind of marriage for those who wish to practice it.

Jesus had dealt with this question before. Some Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection, had come to Jesus to ask of Him a very strange question about the resurrection.

They posed this question: "Moses said that if a man dies, having no children, his next of kin (his brother) shall marry his wife and raise up an offspring for his brother. Now, there were seven brothers, all of them husband to her, and finally she died. In the resurrection whose wife shall she be?" Jesus had responded that in the resurrection there will not be marriage. I encourage you to read the story for yourself in Matthew 22:23-32. So, as we read the story of this woman, we can easily understand how this sounds like her situation. When her husband died, the next brother in line married her and provided for her.

It was not a marriage for love. It was a marriage of tradition and culture. The practice was not that unusual. It kept the clan together and the race pure.

This woman in Sychar had been married to five of these men and the last one had refused to marry her. This woman had been "handed down" from husband to husband. She had perhaps never known a relationship of love from any man.

This also tells us that she knows the Jewish Law of Moses and that she is attempting, as best she can, to live as a practicing Jew who is also looking for the Messiah.

Perhaps her personal life is why she had come to the well at noon to draw water. Perhaps she isn't included in the social circle of "successful" women. And now she meets a Man who actually sees her as a person who is valued. Never would she have imagined that what she thought of as a chance meeting would forever change her life.

She leaves her water pot. That isn't important now. She returns to the village and tells everyone Who she has found. And the people of the town come streaming out to meet Jesus. And when they have personally met Jesus and heard what He has to teach them, they believe. They accept Him as their Messiah, their Lord.

Jesus had to go through Samaria.

Jesus remained in the town for two days before continuing his journey to Galilee. The people in Sychar found their Messiah.

Scattered through the Book of Acts are stories of the disciples preaching and ministering in Samaria after the ascension of Jesus.

Jesus chose a Samaritan woman to lead a spiritual revival. Think about this, Jesus began the conversation by asking her for *her* help. Jesus was teaching us some lessons. Jesus moved the emphasis from *exclusion* to *inclusion*.

All persons, regardless of

- culture,
- race,
- ethnicity,
- gender identity,
- social standing,
- financial ability.

are invited into God's grace. In God's kingdom, in God's plan, in God's invitation, there is no group of people who are not included in the invitation. The theologian Irenaeus would invite us to see others as Jesus did. He described this as seeing everyone through "grace-healed" eyes. Everyone is important to God. You are important to God.

Amen.