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Given at Christ Church Quaker Farms, Oxford, CT

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; **John 4:5-42**

Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. †

At this time in our lives, many of us fear the unknown, worried about potential health and financial issues, the many conflicts in our nation, and the recent war in the Middle East. All these produce an air of fear and general unhappiness. It's appropriate then, that we hear today from a section of the OT, known as 'the murmuring stories' (occur both in Exodus and Numbers) about God's testing of the Israelites in the wilderness and their complaints and grumbling against Moses and God. Paired with the reading from Romans, which speaks of how suffering leads to endurance and eventually to hope in God, they are meant to show that the Lord is indeed among us, even when bad things happen and *even when we doubt* God's presence.

Notice that the stories from the OT and the Gospel are both about *water*. Remember that water is not just refreshing, but *life giving*! We *need* water in order to live... It's really important! And Jesus speaks today of something more, about living water, and says, "Anyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again... anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst again" (4.13). Let's explore this concept of 'living water' together.

John's Gospel overflows with very powerful ironic images—they are a contrast, often humorous, between what is expected and what is actually happening— and one of the best examples is in this very passage. Neither the Samaritan woman nor the disciples understand what's really going on. The characters are caught in an irony of movements that is meant to explain to us (the audience) how the "Word became flesh and was in the world... but the world didn't know it"! (1.14) This is because Jesus is an ironical Christ. That is, he was not who the Jews expected, not what humans expect in a Savior. Thus, confusion and ignorance abound... similar to our current situation, stoked by the current world crises, and the health and environmental crises which have plagued us for years, but little seems to be done to correct them. No one knows what's going to happen next!

Notice how the Samaritan woman (just like the character of Nicodemus we met last week) is so slow to move toward faith. Slow to go from darkness to light, from blindness to sight, from ignorance to knowledge, from confusion to understanding. These 'clueless' characters of John's

Gospel are reflections of *most* Christian believers, of each one of *us*, as we move from confusion to understanding, from doubt to belief, and from suffering to hope.

Another remarkable aspect of this story is that it is Jesus who *initiates* contact with the woman at the well. Notice that it is Jesus that is thirsty! Strong images, meant to remind us that God is indeed the one who *initiates contact with us*, and has done so throughout history. And to remind us that when we meet a stranger, one in need and thirsty, it is essential that we try to meet their human needs and also recognize that often in meeting such human needs, we will encounter God.

Another important detail in this Gospel story is Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman, and even his presence in Samaria at all. Recall, he and his disciples have passed through the borders of Samaria on their way from Jerusalem to Galilee. At that time, Jews and Samaritans did not interact, they belonged to different cultures, and they certainly did not socialize. The image here is that Jesus is *crossing boundaries...* not just geographic or national, but great social boundaries... the boundaries of religion, ethnicity, and gender. Again, Jesus initiates the conversation and interaction. He has brought his Jewish disciples into Samaria, and they must interact and purchase food from Samaritans. He speaks to a *woman*, God forbid! Men, especially rabbis, did not do that. And later, he even stays there in that Samaritan town for two days. He enters into relationship with these non-Jewish outsiders! Shocking according to the standards of that day! This all demonstrates Jesus' *inclusivity...* his openness to the outsider, to the other, something even shocking in our own day! As Jesus said to the woman, "The time is coming, and in fact has already come, when *what you're called* will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter... It's the way you are and the way you live that counts before God" (4.23).

Two final things I'd like to point out from this complex passage, have to do with the *woman*. First, the woman joyfully departs, quickly leaving her *water jug* (a symbol of her need... a tool for obtaining sustenance) behind. A detail perhaps meant to stress that her thirst has been quenched by Jesus, she has received living water and has had her need fulfilled. The water is a symbol, then, of a deeper need of God's Word and God's care for us.

Not only that, but she has become a disciple... she goes off to the other Samaritans and *testifies* to them about the great things Jesus has done for her. And they initially believe in him because of her testimony. She is an apostle; she is among the first Christian evangelists, sharing the good news of Jesus with others around her; telling them the story of the man who "told me everything I have ever done" (4.39). *Everything* I've done and yet loved me anyway. 'He

couldn't be the Messiah, could he?' She shows them how she came to understand, to believe, and to know that she met God.

So, from all these random reflections, what's the take home message today, for us today?

- Look around and open your eyes (*be open*).
- Cross boundaries. Be accepting of others, like Jesus, especially if they are different... *be inclusive*.
- Realize that God's real presence comes to us in *unexpected* places and at unexpected times.
- Share your experience with others. *Witness* to what you see and open the eyes of others.

Let's keep these things in our hearts and minds as we struggle and grumble (like the Israelites) about the troubling events occurring around us in our community, in our nation, and in our world. Consider how and where God may come to us. We all thirst for living water— for the presence of God's Word and God's love in our lives.

Jesus promises in today's Gospel, "the water I will give you will be an inward spring, gushing forth [from within you] fountains of endless life!" (4.14) May the coming weeks of this Lenten season find us drawing closer to Jesus, the fountain of all life! †