

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT — LENT 3 A 2011

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

March 27, 2011

Central, Anchorage

COME TO THE WATER

We have quite a long gospel reading. So, for your sake and mine, please be seated and I will endeavor to tell you John's gospel story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well even as I proclaim this story for our hearing today. Like the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee, when Jesus changed water into wine, and the story of Nicodemus coming to see Jesus at night, when Jesus talked about being born again of water and the spirit, only John tells us about Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. According to John's gospel account, Jesus had already made a visit to Jerusalem. There, he made a whip of cords, drove the money changers out of the temple with the cattle they were selling for sacrifices, and cried out, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" People were beginning to talk about this Jesus of Nazareth.

When he decided to return north to the region of Galilee, he felt compelled to go through Samaria, the very thing that a righteous Jew should not do. He came to Sychar, and sent the disciples into town, to the 7-Eleven or whatever, while he sat down at the town well, Jacob's Well. You remember that Jacob was on the lam, running away from his brother Esau, having stolen both birthright and the father's blessing, when he came upon a well in a pasture. It was midday, and under the bright sun he saw young, fetching Rachel approaching the well. Jacob showed off his muscles, rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well, and watered Rachel's flock. It was then that he kissed her. Boy meets girl.

Jesus, at the same well, tired and thirsty, sits to rest. It was about Noon. A woman from the town comes to fetch water. Jesus addresses her, asking simply and directly for a drink of water. She is surprised that he, a Jewish man, talks to her, a Samaritan woman. What follows is a very different boy meets girl story. All social and religious conventions and mores are thrown out, the rules broken. Listen to how Jesus' thirst and need for water to drink leads to a symbol-filled dialogue about human thirst and need, about living, life-giving water, religious differences and spiritual truth, matters of love and the human heart, and about faithfulness and worship.

Jesus says, "If you knew God's generosity present in the very one saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would ask and I would give you fresh Living Water." Jesus speaks of God's gift and how he, himself, could give her "living water". She responds, "You have no bucket and the well is deep, so how are you going to get this 'living water'?" Like Jesus with Nicodemus, there's a misinterpretation of meaning. The woman thinks Jesus means running or flowing water. But Jesus has something else in mind. She thinks Jesus is a trickster, another unreliable man just playing with her. To her, all this 'gift of God' language seemed like so much 'mumbo jumbo.' In effect, she says, "Give me a break. Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob? What you gonna do, make water flow from a rock like the prophet Moses?"

So, who does Jesus think he is? Does his Jewishness make him special? "Everyone who drinks of this water will again be thirsty, but those who drink of the water I give will never again be thirsty. The water I give keeps flowing—a spring of water gushing up, always giving life." "Sure thing," she says. "Give me this water so I don't have to come here, day after day, schlepping my jar of water back home."

Probably, by this point, Nicodemus or most of us would have given up on this unusual Jew, but not the woman at the well. Jesus gets personal. “Go home, fetch your husband and come back.” What’s this about? What’s with this woman who comes to the well, not in the morning before breakfast, not in the evening before dinner, when all the other women in town come to the well, but she comes in the heat and bright sun of midday? What’s that about? She barely lets on to what it’s about, saying, “I have no husband.” “Nicely put,” Jesus says. “You’ve had five husbands, and you’re not married to the man you’re with now.” Jesus sees her and knows her. The world, the town, her kinsfolk reject her. She’s an outcast. If Jesus, indeed, is talking about her personal life, then she’s had a tough life. Perhaps she is five-times widowed. We don’t know. Jesus knows her, accepts her, welcomes her, loves her.

But maybe in the levels of this conversation Jesus is suggesting something about the Samaritan people and the five nations that, over the years, have infected their worship of the LORD God with worship of other gods. Maybe that’s why the woman turns the conversation to the question of where to worship God, whether on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria or Mt. Zion in Jerusalem of Judea. “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you people are saying that Jerusalem is the place where it is necessary to worship.” This is a major bone of contention between Jews and Samaritans. Who can lay claim to the heritage of Jacob? Who are the truer descendants of Israel? Whose land is most holy? Jesus responds: “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. God is not confined to a place nor owned by a people. God does not send us into battle for a flag or to preserve national identity. Now is the hour to worship God in spirit and truth. Now is the time for integrity of faith. Now is the time to be reborn!” The woman, catching on, responds: “I know the Messiah is coming.” Jesus says, “I am. I am the One—I, the one addressing you.” The “secret” is out—at least between Jesus and this woman.

Just then, the disciples returned. You could tell they were astonished that Jesus was speaking to this woman of Samaria, but they dared not ask why. She took the opportunity to run back into town to tell everyone about the remarkable man at the well. “Come and see,” she said. “Come and see the man who sees me through and through! Could he be the Messiah?” So excited was she, that she left her water jar behind.

The disciples, perhaps now with nuts or dried fruit from their visit to town, encourage Jesus to eat. Jesus, much like in his conversation with Nicodemus and with the woman at the well, turns the conversation from regular, ordinary food to spiritual food, but the disciples don’t catch on. So Jesus explains, “My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete his work.” Jesus completes God’s work. Hmm? Jesus then speaks parabolically about the harvest, encouraging his disciples to see beyond proverbial wisdom to new and surprising things that God is doing. Open your eyes, friends. God has been sowing where you least expect. It’s time to gather fruit for eternal life.

As if on cue, Samaritans from Sychar come out to see this man Jesus for themselves. They heard and responded to the woman’s invitation: “Come and see!” Jesus abides with them. He stays with them for two days. They had responded to this first evangelist, the woman at the well, and now they respond to Jesus himself. They believe. Many great men call themselves savior. The Roman emperor, calls himself savior of the world. But Jesus, this man at the well, is the only one, the true Savior. He is the rock from which God gives living water for our lives, our health and salvation, our peace and reconciliation.

“Give me this water,” said the woman. Jesus says, “I’m the fountain of living water.” The one to whom she gives a cup of well water is the source, the fount and wellspring of life-giving water. Jesus is the water that changes lives, that leads people to confess hidden secrets, that leads us to a whole new way of seeing and believing. We leave the old water jar behind. We begin a new life, becoming a new self. We run to invite and welcome others, even the very people who had been so unkind to us. This life-transforming water is yours and mine in Holy Baptism.

I was baptized September 11, 1949, made a member of the body of Christ and welcomed into the life of the church, made a child of God. God’s promise to me and claim upon me is forever. Yet, even now, each day, I still thirst for the waters of my Baptism.

The Samaritan woman, whose life had been so dramatically changed, the next day still had to return to the well to fetch water. Maybe now she could go at the same hour as other women. Still, when Jesus left town she still had thirst for God. I am like her. I am still thirsty for the living waters, the spiritual fountain of my Baptism. We are baptized, once and for all, yet everyday we still are in need of this fountain of life.

Mystics, poets and saints attest to this continuing thirst and to our need for continuing conversion—again, everyday, to return to the waters of our Baptism. One mystic, Marguerite d’Oingt, a 13th-century monastic, wrote her vision of a way in which her spiritual thirst could be satisfied: “The saints will be within their Creator just as the fish are in the sea; they will drink all they want, without becoming tired and without lessening the amount of water.” Perhaps Marguerite had in mind Jesus’ words from John 7: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture says, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Still thirsty? Come to the One who is the fountain, the source of Living, Life-Giving Water. Daily turn and return to Christ. In Christ we are always welcome. There are no signs posted telling us to stay away from this water, never to drink here or go swimming here, no signs saying this water is polluted. This water is clean and life-giving. Again and again we are invited to return to the fountain of living water. We sing the invitation in our hymns:

Come, thou Fount of ev’ry blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.”

Come to me, all pilgrims thirsty; drink the water I will give.
If you knew what gift I offer, you would come to me and live.

Living Water of salvation, be the fountain of each soul;
springing up in new creation, flow in us and make us whole.

Still thirsty? Return to the wellspring, the font of your Baptism, the sacrament that joined you to Christ and to your sisters and brothers in Christ. Return to the fountain where you were first made wet in the life-giving waters. Return to the well and again meet Jesus, who welcomes you to drink of the water source that never runs dry.

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.