

Year A Lent 3 The Well that Never Runs Dry John 4 vv5 to 42

In order to really understand and appreciate all that is going on in today's Gospel story, we need to remember that the bad blood between the Jewish people and the Samaritans had been ongoing for a very long time. They had become two separate kingdoms about a thousand years before Jesus was born. Though once belonging to the tribe of Joseph, one of the 12 tribes of Israel, Samaria had been invaded by Assyria, the population had intermarried, they worshipped God but also the gods of Assyria, and the Jewish people of southern Israel thought of the Samaritans as idol worshipping half-breeds worthy of contempt and even flat-out hatred. In 722 BC, the high priest of the Jews at that time, John Hyrcanus, ordered the destruction of Shechem – the capital of Samaria – and the Samaritan temple at Mount Gerazim.

Devout Jews would have nothing to do with the Samaritans and even went way out of their way to walk around Samaria to get to Galilee which was on the other side. This was the situation that Jesus was faced with. He wanted to travel from Judea to Galilee but Samaria was in-between. The verse right before what we heard today says, "But he had to go through Samaria." Well, no, no he didn't *have* to go through Samaria. He could have taken the long route around as other Jewish travellers did. So, we know, that "having" to go through Samaria means that Jesus had a purpose in mind – there was something he wanted to do...needed to do in Samaria.

We very quickly find out what that is when he meets up with the Samaritan woman at the well. This is actually the longest conversation that Jesus has with anyone in the Gospels...and it is with a woman...it is with a *Samaritan* woman. Since there was some patriarchal influence, shall we say, on the contents of the Scriptures that we know today, this story likely made the cut since many people see it as an example of womanly sinfulness and Jesus' abundant forgiveness of sins. I *am* thankful for the

presence of this story in John's Gospel precisely because it is *not* all about a sinful woman being forgiven her sins.

This is far too narrow a vision and understanding of the good news of Christ. God does forgive our sins but Jesus did not have to die to accomplish that. A very much alive and well Jesus Christ says to the paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven" and then Jesus heals this man and the man is able to walk. So why did Jesus die? What is the good news of Christ? The problem with being told, "your sins are forgiven" is that it is only a matter of time before we need to hear those words again. We must also remember that the definition of sin is not all of the little – or even the big – things that we each do. Sin is bigger than that, it means more than that. Sin is the turning away from God, a lapse in our relationship with God. Sin is not only human brokenness but also the brokenness permeating the systems of the world because of our brokenness. The good news that Jesus proclaims to us is that God's kingdom is here and we are invited into it. As we hear in the ancient hymn called the *Te Deum*, "[Christ] overcame the sting of death/and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers." Jesus passed through death into new life in God's kingdom and he accomplished this while never once falling into sin – that is, never once breaking his relationship with God – although he was human as we are.

While we were yet sinners – while we are still sinners – Jesus gives *us* this gift of life with God in God's kingdom through baptism. In the mystery of baptism, we participate in his death and resurrection that brought him completely into God's kingdom, raised to new life in his glorious, imperishable post-resurrection body. We die in Christ and are raised with Christ, given the gift of the Holy Spirit, clothed in Christ's righteousness, a new creation, in relationship with God. Jesus overcame sin not just in the individual sense but in the big sense, the global sense – sin as the lack

of relationship with God was put right through Jesus, the rift was healed through Jesus. We are in relationship with God in God's kingdom and, despite the reality that we are still able to turn away from God and turn back, we are on God's highway travelling with God and with many others toward the total reconciliation intended for us and for the world. We are headed toward the time when it will be said of us, just as it was of Jesus, that we are tempted yet without sin – tempted but we do not turn from God. As we journey together towards that time of complete healing of our brokenness, the brokenness we create in the world, too, will be healed. All things will be reconciled, in right relationship, through Christ. We see this repairing of relationship today, in Jesus offering salvation to the Samaritan woman at the well. Salvation – as I've said before – means to rescue, to heal, to make whole...and this can only be achieved in relationship with God.

After the Samaritan woman's shocked response to being spoken to by a Jewish man, Jesus immediately launches into his message of salvation. He is able to give her living water, he tells her. Her reply, asking Jesus, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well?" establishes the common ground between them. They share Jacob as their ancestor. The divisions are left behind them as Jesus continues to explain what lies before. "The water that I will give," Jesus says, "will become in [the people] a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Water is an important, recurring topic throughout John's Gospel. We often hear talk of baptism and of John the Baptizer. Jesus' first sign of the kingdom in this Gospel is to turn water into an abundance of the best wine. Last week we heard a conversation about being born of water and the Spirit. And now, at a well – a source of life in a parched desert – Jesus is offering himself up as living water...true life...eternal life. The woman, of course, asks for this gift of water but Jesus then seems to ignore her answer and asks her to go get her husband. Why?

Well, wells are important in our salvation story. Abraham sends his servant off to find a wife for his son, Isaac. The servant finds this wife, Rebekah, at a well. Isaac and Rebekah have a son, Jacob, who finds his wife, Rachel, at a well at noon-day. This type of repetition of a scene sets up an expectation for John's audience when Jesus stops at a well at noon and talks to a woman. The story takes a dark turn where marriage is concerned when we discover that this unfortunate woman has been passed, from one husband to the next, as a piece of property. Having multiple husbands could come about for a number of reasons since divorce was easy for a man to obtain plus the death of one husband would necessitate becoming the wife of another in order to be provided for. Jesus is not shaming the woman but, rather, is drawing attention to the sorry state that marriage had been reduced to by society at that time: broken people creating a broken system. Their way of engaging in personal relationships and relationship with God is in need of repair and healing.

Jesus directs her thinking toward a marriage that cannot be corrupted by brokenness. He tells her of the mended relationship with God and with all people that is coming. The time is coming when divisions will end – people won't be arguing about where the correct place to worship God is. God is Spirit, he tells her – God does not need to be worshiped in a particular spot. All people will realize the truth of this fact and will simply all be worshiping God together in spirit and truth he tells her.

The Samaritans, just as the Jewish people did, anticipated the arrival of a messianic figure, called the *Taheb*. A 3rd century BC Samaritan document called the *Memar Marqah*, says, "The Taheb will come and reveal the truth." Jesus has earlier in their conversation, deliberately told her she has spoken the truth, has told her he somehow knows that she has spoken the truth and reminds her that God, who is

Spirit, will be worshipped in spirit and truth. The woman is piecing all of this together and is convinced that Jesus is the messiah they are waiting for.

Jesus confirms her hope: “I am (he) ... the one speaking to you” (John 4:26). The woman knows she has encountered the messiah, has been invited into relationship with God through him – an incorruptible relationship of eternal life in God’s kingdom. Each week, those who gather to worship together at Holy Eucharist, go through the same process. We encounter God and are reminded of the shared salvation story between us. We are invited by God to join the feast in God’s kingdom – a feast we share because we share life with Christ in the kingdom. It is a life we were given in baptism. Sharing in his death and resurrection, we also share in his eternal life in God’s kingdom. We joyfully remind ourselves of this glorious reality by rehearsing and reliving our salvation story – refreshing our memories and our hope...sharing the food that is Christ’s body because we have been made, through water and the Spirit, a member of that body.

When we hear Jesus today announce, “I am”, meaning, “I am the Messiah,” this is the one and only time he directly reveals his identity to anyone in the Gospel. The fact that he reveals this to a woman and to a Samaritan is deeply significant. It signals the importance of women and the erasing of lines of division. It is a turning upside-down of conventional thinking...thinking that, unfortunately, still exists in the minds of many even today. Jesus challenges the status quo and makes clear that God’s kingdom is available to everyone who turns to God.

The story, though, does not end with this good news. The woman is sent off by her excitement and hope to share this good news with the people of her village. As the woman disappears from sight to engage in this mission, Jesus reminds the disciples that they, too, are sent. Using imagery of harvesting, Jesus tells them that they are to

gather in the abundant harvest that God has planted. We, too, are a sent people. Dr. Juan Oliver explains in his book, *A House of Meanings*: “The Church exists for the sake of the world, and not to take us out of [the world]. If it does, for an hour every Sunday,” he continues, “it is only to send us right back again on mission: to proclaim, by deeds and words if necessary, the Good News of the nearness of the Reign. For the gospel is not merely the story about Jesus; it is hard to imagine him saying to the crowds ‘I was born of a virgin, in a stable, and these foreigners came with weird presents,’No, the gospel of Jesus is what he went around saying: ‘The reign of God is very near; change your hearts and trust the Good News.’ (p.158). The “Good News”, though, is not simply sharing our faith in Jesus and saying, “God loves you.” For, as Dr. Oliver says so very bluntly, “prattle about Jesus is not good news to [those in need].” Good News for the people in need around us may “include jobs, a roof over their heads, income; safety, acknowledgement, acceptance; medical care, respect, and hope; ...full equality for LGBTQ persons, recognition of women’s authority. This is the true agenda of the Church: proclaiming the Good News of the closeness of the Reign of God *tangibly*, for all to see and feel, and not simply increasing our membership by finding customers of our spiritual goods. We are a community,” he writes, “not a store” (p.162-3).

I believe we are getting better and better at tangibly spreading the Good News – caring near and far and sharing our abundance near and far. We are touching lives and we are making a difference. When we recognize and set free the hopeful passionate excitement within us – that we have salvation, we are being made whole, the wholeness is spreading, we are living in God’s kingdom...that passion is contagious. Embrace the hope and let go of the resistance and fear. We have the spring of water gushing up to eternal life and *that* well will *never* run dry.