

Message for March 12, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday in Lent
“Thirsting in the Wilderness” Rev. Trish Eckert

Exodus 17: 1-7
John 4: 7-15

From the First Testament, the reading this morning is one of several stories in the Book of Exodus in which the Israelites complain to Moses. In the previous chapter, they complained that they should have stayed in Egypt where they had plenty to eat, because they were hungry in the wilderness. God provided them manna from heaven. Now they are seeking water to quench their thirst.

This story speaks to the difficult terrain and frightening unknowns that we all navigate in the wilderness, and it also bears witness to the faithfulness and graciousness of God. In the very first line of today’s reading, we hear that the Israelites journeyed in stages from the “Wilderness of Sin,” and although we could explore at length how this language could be beautifully applied metaphorically, it’s important to note that the name Sin has no relation to the English word “sin.” It is merely the name of the region, although its similarity to the name Sinai and its proximity to Sinai suggests a possible connection. The area may have derived its name from the ancient moon god, Sin, who was worshiped by desert dwellers. The Wilderness of Sin is one of six wildernesses through which the Israelites traveled on their way to Canaan. The wildernesses include Shur, Etham, Sin, Sinai, Paran, and Zin.

This is a story about Israel’s history, but the primary purpose isn’t to learn about the past. Rather, it is told so that we – who were, in the eyes of the ancient Israelites, a generation yet unborn and probably unimagined – could know God’s love and grace. The story points to what it means that all humans are flawed creatures who struggle mightily in the wilderness and it also names what it means to have a gracious and faithful God.

A human body can survive a surprisingly long time without food. But in a correspondingly short time, without water, a human body will die. Certainly, the Israelites complaint is valid because they were dying of thirst. What we witness among this tribe wandering through the wilderness is that their faith is tested. We hear them turn on Moses, just as they did in the previous chapter when they were so hungry! It is their lack of faith and the way that they turn on Moses—who has just been the “means of grace” through which God had delivered them from slavery and fed them with manna and quails—that is the problem. This lack of faith—or perhaps we could name it hard-heartedness, or stiff-neckedness, or ingratitude, or fear—is the aspect of the human condition that the story names. I can definitely relate to this attitude, and I imagine you can, too – when we are afraid, it is incredibly difficult to remain open hearted and patiently wait. If I were dying of thirst in the desert, I’d be pulling out all the stops to survive.

The people demand water. God graciously and faithfully responds not to their lack of faith, but to their human need. Because God is faithful, God responds out of grace and love. Moreover, God does so in a manner that provides not simply for their physical need, but in a way that restores the community! Previously, working through Moses, God had caused bread (which normally grows out of the ground) to rain down from heaven. Here, working again through Moses, God causes water, (which often rains down from heaven) to spring forth from the earth. By working through Moses, the community is restored even as the people's bodily needs are met. We are called to be mindful of God's provision even in the desert places.

Just as the Israelites wander through the wilderness, we too wander through our own versions of wilderness, and as we hear Jesus speak to the Samaritan woman today, we get a sense of the wilderness she is experiencing.

In this morning's Gospel reading, we hear from John the familiar story of the woman at the well. As I read through commentaries, striving to hear this story with fresh ears, I was fascinated to learn that this is the longest one-on-one conversation recorded in the gospels between Jesus and another person. The full lectionary reading covers verses 5-42, though we only heard verses 7-15.

The Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at Jacob's Well gleans much from her conversation with Jesus. When she discovers his identity as the Messiah she leaves her water jar, much like the disciples left their nets, and becomes an evangelist to her community. Near the end of the full reading, we learn that "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony."

There are 28 different verses about wells in the Bible, and many of them involve a woman near a well, indicating that something momentous is bound to happen. Genesis gives us a rich quartet of woman-at-the-well stories. The book offers two accounts in which Hagar meets God—or an angel of God—at a well in the wilderness: the first time, in Genesis 16, Hagar has run away, fleeing from the harshness of Sarai. The second time, in Genesis 21, God provides a well to a desperate Hagar and her son Ishmael, who lies near death in a waterless wilderness. Genesis 24 tells of a servant who finds Rebekah, Isaac's bride-to-be, at a well. Another well serves as a signal of matrimony in Genesis 29, when Jacob meets Rachel at the well where she waters her father's sheep.

In today's story, it is a curious thing for a single rabbi to strike up a conversation with a woman he finds at a well. But Jesus is a curious sort of rabbi, and so he wades into an exchange with a Samaritan woman who has come to draw her water at noonday.

Their talk of literal water turns toward a conversation about the living water that Jesus offers. The woman is thirsty, and she asks Jesus for this living water. What we didn't hear this morning, but we know continues to unfold in this story, is that Jesus tells her to go and bring her husband. Yet he already knows all the moving parts of her life – she

has no husband; she's had five of those, and she's not married to the man she's currently living with. Jesus doesn't judge her, and through his obvious grasp of her story that she did not share with him, she recognizes Jesus as a prophet.

She then has a deep conversation with Jesus. She touches on the source of division between the Jewish and Samaritan people: their difference of belief in the location of the proper place to worship God. The Samaritans held that "this mountain," Mount Gerizim, was the correct place of worship, while the Jews maintained that Jerusalem was the rightful place. There by the well, Jesus assures the woman that a time is coming when such questions will fall away, and all who worship God will worship "in spirit and truth." Their theological exchange culminates with Jesus' telling the woman that he is the Messiah of whom she has spoken.

At this point the disciples turn up, astonished that Jesus is talking with this woman. Neither Jesus nor the woman is fazed. Then John provides a fascinating detail. He writes, "Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city."

She left her jar. She left her jar behind, that water-bearing vessel on which she depended for her very life. She abandoned it at the well.

She had become the vessel. Filled with the living water that she found in the midst of her mundane, daily task; the woman goes to spill forth what she has found. She is unnamed, all throughout John's story, but not unchanged. This unmarried, unnamed woman of Samaria becomes an evangelist, a disciple, a witness to the Messiah. She is a vessel of living, liberating, life-giving water.

The encounter between Jesus and the unnamed woman extends to us an invitation. If we give ourselves to a daily practice, if we keep taking our vessel to the source even when we feel uninspired or the well seems empty or the journey is boring, if we walk with an openness to what might be waiting for us in the repetition and rhythm of our routines, we may suddenly find ourselves swimming in the grace and love of God that goes deeper than we ever imagined. When we feel lost or confused or frustrated, moving through the rhythm of our days - just showing up can build in us the capacity to notice the gifts of grace that are bestowed upon us.

As I opened our worship this morning with a blessing written by Jan Richardson, I want to close my message today with another of her beautiful blessings. This one she wrote as a contemplation of today's gospel reading, and I think it's a wonderful way to enter into our period of silent reflection. So, let's turn our attention to the reflection questions in the bulletin, and then listen to her blessing.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- As you travel through this season
- What are you finding in the midst of your daily rhythms and routines?
- Are your habits and practices drawing you closer to the sustenance you need or pulling you farther away from it?
- What are you thirsty for?
- How might you remain open and take your vessel to the source?

Blessing of the Well

If you stand
at the edge
of this blessing
and call down
into it,
you will hear
your words
return to you.

If you lean in
and listen close,
you will hear
this blessing
give the story
of your life
back to you.

Quiet your voice
quiet your judgment
quiet the way
you always tell
your story
to yourself.

Quiet all these
and you will hear
the whole of it
and the hollows of it:
the spaces
in the telling,
the gaps

where you hesitate
to go.

Sit at the rim
of this blessing.
Press your ear
to its lip,
its sides,
its curves
that were carved out
long ago
by those whose thirst
drove them deep,
those who dug
into the layers
with only their hands
and hope.

Rest yourself
beside this blessing
and you will
begin to hear
the sound of water
entering the gaps.

Still yourself
and you will feel it
rising up within you,
filling every hollow,
springing forth
anew.