

LENT 3A Jn 4.5-42 for Spruce Run LC

Water is the common motif that links together today's readings, and as we look at the whole picture, that theme leads us into reflection on our human need for God's grace and mercy. In the 1st reading we drop in among the Israelites on their escape from Egypt, as they progress through the Sinai desert. As they get desperately thirsty and cannot seem to find any water sources, the people begin to grumble and complain against Moses—is this desert really where we needed to go? At this point Moses feared for his life because of the desperation the people felt, and he prayed fervently to God. He was led to a rock from which water would gush out if he struck the rock with his staff (in the same way that he earlier had struck the Nile River). The name given to this location was Massah and Meribah (“testing” & “complaining”), because God was tested.

Today's psalm (95) is a praise psalm, but it has a brief prophetic warning tacked on at the end. It praises God as greater than all the gods that other peoples worship, and as creator of all that exists, seen and unseen, but then it warns: don't be like those who complained and lost trust at Massah & Meribah! In our 2nd reading, from ch 5 of St Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, Paul sets forth for us a picture of patient and uncomplaining endurance, whatever our suffering or uncertainty (in direct contrast with events at Massah & Meribah). Paul says we can do this because we have such a great gift from God in Jesus Christ and because God has so proactively loved us, pouring out love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Paul here is thinking of the waters of baptism where we are joined to Christ through the water and divine word of promise.

In today's Gospel reading (Jn 4), Jesus has paused in his travel to quench his thirst at an well in Samaria, where he then proceeds to engage in a very witty repartee with an unnamed but very smart Samaritan woman. Jesus ends up offering her what he calls “living water.” This encounter at the well happens at the Samaritan town of Sychar, near the ancient well that long before was known as Jacob's well. John really draws out this story to great length, yet it is really a simple story on a surface level. But, as is typical in John's Gospel, if we have only noticed a simple story, we have doubtless missed something important at a deeper level. In John's Gospel things happen, stories are reported, but so often there are multiple levels of meaning layered in by John. He writes this late in his life and he has had lots of time to reflect on all the Jesus events in which he was a participant. John here shows us this Samaritan woman as someone quite sharp and able to keep right up with Jesus' subtle implications and double meanings.

But what was the real rationale for telling this story? The clue is in v.9, where the Samaritan woman asks Jesus: “How is it that you, a Jew (or Judean; [Greek *joudaios*]), ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” And John adds the explanatory parenthesis: that Jews/Judeans have no dealings with Samaritans! This story was much valued in the early church for showing Jesus' own actions of openness and lack of any bias toward Samaritans (or women!). This story was told and retold to give validation to the church's later outreach to the Samaritan people. As he ends this long story, John reports that many in Samaria came to belief in Jesus because of this event.

To us it probably seems strange that some early Christians would have opposed outreach to Samaritans. Some of those who came to belief in Jesus from a conservative Jewish background considered outreach to non-Jews to be impossible, or at least exceptional. Their reasoning was that Jesus came as the Jewish messiah; how could non-Jews relate? But stories like this one

about the Samaritan woman show that if they have that kind of bias, they are at odds with Jesus himself.

It was not until the council of Jerusalem in the year 50 CE that a broadly representative group met and a decision was taken (Acts 15). This council had in effect been forced by the outreach of Paul and Barnabas among Gentiles, which had been opposed by the Jerusalem church. It was only when Peter, the leader of the 12, agreed during this Jerusalem council that Gentiles (non-Jews) could be baptized into Christ without 1st meeting the Torah requirements. Once it was obvious that Peter and Paul were agreed, it became the majority view: Gentile outreach was OK.

The Samaritans were the later descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel, the capital of which had been Samaria. In the 720s BCE, long before the time of Jesus, the Assyrian military had destroyed Samaria and deported its king and leadership groups into exile in Assyria. They left behind only peasants, and resettled other people they had conquered into Samaria; these groups couldn't speak any common language and to the Assyrians that meant that they could not organize rebellion against them. Centuries later, there had been intermarriages. To the southern Judeans, especially those who returned from their own exile in Babylonia, these Samaritans were seen as heretics; their temple was not in Jerusalem and they were ethnically not pure because of intermarriage. This was the time of Ezra the scribe who saw intermarriage with non-Jews as a major reason for the Judean exile. By Jesus' time we see in the NT this view of Samaritans fully in place.

But the Samaritans considered themselves good and faithful Jews; worship of the one God on Mt Gerizim actually went back farther than worship on Mt Zion in Jerusalem. It was on Mt Gerizim that Joshua had read from the Torah to the Israelites when they 1st entered the promised land. The Samaritan claim had merit that their temple had a pedigree just as old indeed, even older, as that of the Jerusalem temple.

Luke records the parable Jesus told about a Good Samaritan. It was shocking for his hearers that a Samaritan of all people could be a model for what it means to embody the love and mercy of God toward others in need. This parable makes clear that there was still a climate of mistrust and animosity between north and south in Jesus' day. So, we should not be surprised that this might still be an issue in some sectors of the early church; we don't really want to reach out to "them," do we?

The church had to wrestle with this, and here John records this incident in which Jesus deliberately takes his disciples into Samaria where he reaches out to someone that Judean men doubly downgraded: a very smart person who is both a Samaritan and a woman. John has cleverly built into his narrative in this story, at a between-the-lines level, the imprimatur of the early church for reaching out with the good news to Samaritans (and Gentiles in general), and the authority for doing this in from Jesus himself!

It was at that time considered improper for a rabbi to converse in public with a woman, and in v.27 the disciples are shocked to see Jesus doing that. But Jesus is here prefiguring a new model for his followers—for the church—and John wants to be sure that we see it—the model of a kind of human oneness in which these discriminating barriers among humans no longer matter (because they do not matter to God). Paul makes the same point in Gal 3, where he stresses that none of our differences matter for persons in Christ, because we are all loved by God.

Jesus is here declaring that these sorts of ethnic or gender distinctions—Jew or Samaritan, female or male—are irrelevant in light of what God is doing. He says that worship of God is in spirit and in truth; it isn't about ethnic identity or even holy places. Both temples—in Jerusalem and on Mt Gerizim—point beyond themselves to a deeper spiritual reality. At this well in Sychar they are situated near the base of the Samaritan holy mountain, Mt Gerizim, and Jesus declares:

“The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . .when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.”

At this point in the narration, a lightbulb clicks on for the woman at the well, and she begins to see where Jesus is going regarding the future God is preparing, and she says: “I know that Messiah is coming!” And Jesus responds: “I am he.”

Suddenly, what has been up to this point a kind of curiously detached intellectual discussion gets transformed into an event of the woman telling the news to the townspeople. She has seen new possibilities and needs to tell others. Forget all the ethnic distinctions and barriers; she has heard the good news about living water & true worship of God, free to all people!

This Sunday, in the 3rd week of our Lenten journey, we share in and celebrate the transforming and nourishing power of God, who offers the water of life. John's point today is that what God could do with a woman of Samaria, can also be done with any person, and especially, with us. In the midst of our busy lives and our often ambiguous circumstances, we can discover nourishment for our spiritual thirst. As we join here to worship God in word and sacrament, we can drink deeply of the living water shared with us by God's Messiah, the savior of the world. In the long ago words of Bernard of Clairvaux, here “our thirsting souls from you we fill.” And with the strength and support of our Lord we can grow daily toward his likeness, in faith and love and compassion for all. AMEN.