

John 4:3–17 (NRSV)

He left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up *forever*." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Living Water

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: March 23, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: John 4:3-17

- Spent Passover in Jerusalem
- Went to the Jordan where John was
- Summer, near springs near the Dead Sea where there was water in the dry season
- Catches attention of Pharisees who hear Jesus' disciples are baptizing more than John
- Jesus leaves Judea and heads back to Galilee [**slide 1**]
- He has to go through Samaria
- Jews and Samaritans didn't get along
- Both thought they had the true religion
- Goes way back
 - + Samaritans built temple on Mt. Gerazim
 - + Jews said Temple should be in Jerusalem
 - + Exile
- As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus dismisses these old divides. He crosses old walls. He breaks down old fences.
- He heads right through the heart of Samaria
- Here's the situation
 - + It's summer in the desert
 - + Everything is parched
 - + Temperatures are in the mid 80s
 - + It hasn't rained in several months
 - + His feet kick up dust
 - + And it is high Noon, the 6th hour, the very middle of the day
 - + We don't know why Jesus is travelling at this hour
 - + It's easy to understand, though, that he was exhausted and simply sat down at the well
 - + If you've ever been in the desert at high Noon in the summer, you know how welcome a well is
 - + Water, you can't live without it very long, especially in those conditions
 - + It is literally the stuff of life
- This deep well has stood in the desert since the time of Jacob and before that
 - + It's still there now, still providing refreshment, today [**Slide 2**]
 - + It never goes dry
 - + It was there for Jesus, too, water of life
- We don't know why Jesus is travelling at this hour and in these conditions
 - + And we don't know why there's a woman at the well at this hour, either, but she is
 - + There in the middle of the blistering heat they meet
 - + At the ancient well, the well of Jacob, the water of life

- + Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water
- + More barriers ignored
- + She's a Samaritan, a woman, on both counts Jesus has no business asking her
- + She's shocked
- + She brings up the old divides (Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where it is necessary to worship.)
- Then begins the back and forth [Slides 3-8]
 - + "If you knew the gift of God ... he would have given you living water."
 - + "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"
 - + "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up *forever*."
 - + The woman answers, still missing the full meaning of his words, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."
- Jesus is talking about a different kind of water
 - + Of course the woman will need the well water again
 - + So will Jesus
 - + So will we
 - + Jesus isn't saying that you won't need drinking water again
 - + He's talking about a life-giving force that can spring up within us
 - + The water of life that quenches our parched inner selves
 - + Jesus knows that well water is essential, but it only satisfies our bodies
 - + It doesn't satisfy that inner thirst
 - + It doesn't satisfy our spirit
 - + It doesn't refresh that dried up stuff inside us
 - + Jesus knows that every day for us is a walk in the heat of the desert sun
 - + Jesus knows we are thirsty
 - + Jesus knows that no amount of well water will slake that inner dryness
 - + Jesus knows that we want to be refreshed, made new, made whole

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

- Three escaped convicts in the 1930s south.
 - + Everett McGill is the smooth-tongued ring leader who has escaped with Pete and Delmar, only because they are still chained together from the chain gang.
 - + Everett has convinced Pete and Delmar to escape with the promise of 1.2 million dollars stashed away from the robbery that put him in jail.
 - + Everett McGill has only a passing acquaintance with the truth.
 - + Everett wants to escape because his wife who is sick of his slick ways is about to marry another man.
 - + Anyway at a certain point, things don't seem to be going too well. Their vehicle has broken down, they are a long way from the supposed treasure, and the treasure will be under water in a few days, because its hiding place is being flooded for a hydroelectric dam.

- + So here we have the three men in the woods trying to figure out their next scheme, looking for their own versions of a well in the desert.
- Suddenly there is a broken down ornate old wrought iron gate
 - + Then pieces of the wrought iron fence, some standing, some laying down in the leaves.
 - + And among the trees are gravestones.
 - + It is the kind of illogical scene you might find in a dream.
 - + And then it gets even more surreal.
 - + Quietly at first, they hear the choir, “As I went down to the river to pray, Studying about that good old way, Who shall wear the robe and crown, O Lord, show me the way.”
 - + Then through the sepia colored forest begin to filter the singers, all dressed in pure white, all moving in one direction. “Oh sisters let's go down, Let's go down, come on down. Oh sisters let's go down, Down in the river to pray.”
- The three convicts are drawn to follow the singers.
 - + Soon they come to a river.
 - + A minister is in the river baptizing the singers.
 - + Everett scoffs at the ceremony. He has no faith in religion.
 - + But Delmar is captivated. He moves into the river, and the minister lowers him under and then brings him up. Delmar is baptized.
 - + Pete looks on incredulously and says something close to, “I’ll be a son of a gun, Delmar’s been saved.”
 - + And indeed Delmar has. He comes wading out of the water shouting, “I been redeemed. The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It’s the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlastin’ is my reward! The preacher done said all my sins been washed away, includin’ that Piggly-Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.”
 - + Everett, who isn’t buying any of this reminds Delmar, “I thought you said you were innocent of those charges.”
 - + Delmar has that wild-eyed look of a kid whose hands just got caught in the cookie jar, that blank, O boy, what am I gonna do now look. But then he realizes his world is changed. He smiles triumphantly and says, “Well I was lyin’. The preacher said that sin been washed away, too. Neither God nor man has anything on me now. Come on in boys, the water is fine!”
- Like the others, Delmar was looking for a well in the desert—in this case, buried money.
 - + But instead Delmar finds living water, the source of life
 - + It won’t run out like the money
- A short time later, Delmar is trying to explain the wonderful change in his situation. He says, “The preacher said it absolved us of all our sins.”
 - + But still the realist, Everett McGill says, “Maybe in the sight of the Lord. But the state of Mississippi is a little more hard-nosed than that.”
 - + Well Everett McGill may be the realist. But Delmar is actually transformed.
 - + The living water has made him a new person.
- In the rest of the movie, Delmar is now a man more comfortable with honesty than dishonesty.

- + In one scene he steals a pie cooling on the window sill at a farmhouse. But he immediately turns around, goes back to the window and places a dollar bill under a rock on the sill in payment for the pie.
- + In another scene he becomes convinced that Pete has been turned into a frog by sirens, and keeps the frog in a box and protects it from harm.
- + And later, when their black friend is grabbed by the Klu Klux Klan, Delmar doesn't hesitate to save him in the face of huge odds.
- Delmar was transformed by living water.
 - + He no longer was dry and brittle, and lost inside.
 - + Delmar was given living water not because he deserved it, but because he asked for it.
 - + Ironically, it was only after he was given living water that he became a better man.
- Life is a funny thing
 - + Sometimes we chase after false things. Everett, Delmar and Pete chased after happiness through a life of crime and dishonesty
 - + Mostly we know those things don't work
- But the well water is different
 - + The well water is good; it's necessary for life
 - + Well water is one of those important things in life: food, water, making ends meet, being upstanding
 - + Like the woman at the well we need plain water, Jesus needs it, everybody needs it
- But the truth is, none of those things—as good and important and essential as they are—is the living water, the water that bubbles within a renewed spirit, the water that moistens and refreshes the soul, the spring of water that gushes up forever, the water that makes us new and whole
- This living water awaits
- We must simply ask for it, and it will be given to us. Amen.