

Sermon: Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusunur | March 12, 2023

"Give us water to drink" cry out the Israelites to Moses in the wilderness. "Give me a drink" asks a tired Jesus to a Samaritan woman. "Sir, give me this water to drink" says that curious Samaritan woman in return to Jesus. They all wanted to quench their thirst.

Thirst is that strong urge, that urgent desire to satisfy that craving for water or a drink. It's a physiological and psychological emergency when you are not able to quench that thirst for a very long time. I for one can't stand thirst for long. Just the thought of not having water when I may need it makes me immediately feel thirsty. I have this habit of keeping a bottle of water close to me when I sleep just in case I might get thirsty in the middle of the night. The truth is I almost have never woken up to actually take a sip. But I get anxious if the water is not right next to me!

I don't know how long you can stay thirsty, but I think all of us know that uneasy feeling which accompanies thirst. The Israelites had been journeying from one place to another in the wilderness and when they had camped at this place called Rephidim, they discovered that there was no water for them in that place. This was a crisis. They were mad at Moses for leading them there. No water could eventually mean death. They quarreled with Moses and shouted at him: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" It's a full-blown crisis. Tempers were so high that they were almost ready to stone Moses to death. It was a desperate moment for all of them.

Jesus had been journeying along with his disciples travelling from Judah in the south to Galilee in the north. In this multiple day's journey, they stopped near a Samaritan city. It was noon, Jesus was tired from the journey, and he was sitting by the famous Jacob's well

in the city. When he saw a Samaritan woman come to draw water from the well to fill her water jar, he asked the woman "Give me a drink."

The requests for water from the Israelites to Moses, or from Jesus to the woman did not have a straightforward resolution. In the case of Moses, there was simply no water in that area to satisfy that request. Moses, afraid for his own life, and exasperated by the conflict and blame, cries out to God for help. "What should I do?" he asks God.

To Jesus' tired request for water, the woman instead of giving him water replies "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" To the woman the circumstances surrounding this request are problematic and need resolution before there can be a resolution to Jesus' thirst. Jesus was transgressing societal norms and boundaries. A male Jew was not supposed to be conversing and requesting water from the same hands and water jar that the Samaritans drank.

There is thirst in the world. Every twenty second of March, about ten days from today, the United Nations observes World Water Day. It's a way to create awareness of the value of water and how millions of people around the world don't have access to clean water. WHO statistics say that today, 1 in 4 people lack safe drinking water. In many countries including India, access to safe drinking water is very limited. In many houses in urban India, including mine, drinking water comes in the taps only for a short hour or so every day, and one needs to store water for the entire day within that time. But in rural places the situation is much more dire. Women in some parts of rural India walk an average of ten miles a day to fetch water. Often young girls drop out of school to help their mothers with the immense burden of such

household chores. It's a crisis of enormous proportions and the resolutions are not straightforward. Government policies, finances, local organizations, data collection, and innovation are all part of the complex response.

The crisis of thirst is also a crisis of faith. When the Israelites were thirsty, they had questions about their God. The Israelites wondered with anger, "Is the Lord among us, or not?" They had undertaken an exodus to be free from Egyptian power believing that the Lord was with them. But now that they were thirsting and dying the obvious question was: Is God even with us? The Samaritan woman gets into a conversation with Jesus and realizing that the man who asked her water was no ordinary Jew, but was some sort of prophet she asks Jesus, "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Where was God after all? The conversation around Jesus's thirst had brought about questions of faith, where is God present?

But God was present right there with them. God leads the Israelites to go further ahead to a place called Horeb where there was a rock. God says, "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock." I will be present there. I will be with you. And when Moses strikes the rock, they find water that quenches their thirst. One can only imagine the deep sense of relief after being able to drink water to satisfy the intense thirst. That water was life for them. In a place of strife, desperation, and anger, God's presence and work brought about life and a quenching of thirst.

To the woman's question of where is God?: on this Samaritan mountain or in Jerusalem? Jesus answers God is present here and everywhere. "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." You will worship God in spirit and in truth. But there was more to this. God incarnate in Jesus as grace and love was right there with the woman. God was right there. And that's why despite the woman's hesitancy to give water to Jesus because of the social norms, Jesus responds with offering her living water.

The Episcopal Relief and Development is one way the Episcopal Church tries to answer, "where is God?". This organization works on some of the acute global crises of our times including access to clean water in some countries. Their clean water program partners with local communities to help with building wells and piping systems, installing water stations and systems like rainwater catchment tanks. I suggest a google search for 'episcopal relief clean water' and learning how you can contribute to this effort as well. With donations as small as \$20 we can make an impact. We are called to worship God in spirit and truth.

I'm sure Jesus eventually gets some water to drink, but he also ends us staying in this Samaritan city with the community to which this woman belonged. He offers them living water, a quenching of that deep thirst for God and his goodness. As we experience the goodness of God this Lent, may we work towards doing our part in sharing that goodness in quenching the thirst of all people. Amen.