

“Please Give Me a Drink”
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Presbyterian Church of Teaneck with
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
March 12, 2023

Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:5-29, 39-42

This is a wet Sunday. We have seen two children of God receive water poured over them in the sacrament of Baptism. We know this is an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual blessing that will travel with these boys each day of their lives: it will mark their story with belonging, resilience, and salvation. It is the truth of their belovedness in the eyes of God and this community of Christian witnesses.

Today is a wet Sunday also because the scriptures our lectionary offers today are words that gush with water. First, we see the Hebrews, who had left Egypt, where they had been enslaved. As it turns out, it wasn't enough to be in not-Egypt. The wilderness was so harsh, and so dry, that they looked back at their captivity and wondered if it was all worth it. Imagine how their tongues must have stuck to the roof of their mouths. Imagine the dry pastiness as the dust from the desert mixed with what little moisture remained in them. Imagine their relief, how much their mouths must have come to life, when Moses struck a rock and by God's power brought water gushing out. Can you feel the water traveling, soaking their tongues, lubricating the roof of their mouths, then their throats? Can you feel it coating their bellies, and making their wrinkled skin bounce again?

Maybe you have never known thirst like that. But I suspect there are those among us who know what a wilderness feels like, who know the uncertainty of being the lost ones, and even if it's not for water, you know what it means to thirst.

I also expect there are some of you here today who *almost* didn't even come to church today. Daylight Savings time dawned on us today, earlier than our bodies wanted, and so there was one less hour of sleep; one less hour to get ready, fix your hair, find the right outfit; one less hour to convince any other members of your household that this is the thing that we do: *we go to church*. For those of you who don't usually come to *this* church, you had to wrestle with leaving the comforts of your own church and facing the possibility of the unexpected: where you will park, what pew you will sit in, what familiar or unfamiliar faces you might see. This isn't the well from which you normally drink. But despite any misgivings, the Spirit brought you here... or maybe, it was your thirst.

I don't know about you, but it has been *too* long that we have been doing our own thing, in our own churches, sitting on separate sides of the shore— for us, it isn't the Nile like Moses, or the Jordan like Jesus, but the muddy branch of water of the Hackensack River that flows through Overpeck Park, separating Teaneck from Leonia. We saw a few of you in our Leonia church on

Ash Wednesday and it was just a sip of the cup of fellowship our churches share. I don't know about you, but I wanted more.

Like the Hebrew baby Moses who floated on the Nile, until Pharaoh's daughter found him— *of course it takes a baby*— or more specifically, two toddlers, to bring our cultures together to meet at the water.

Our other wet scripture today happens at a well— Jacob's well, that is. We find Jesus sitting there, in the afternoon sun. He had been traveling from Judea to Galilee, and he was tired by his journey. When a local woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water, Jesus asked her for a drink.

Such a simple request, but bold in its daring. It crossed a gender divide, due to the cultural limits of the time on communication between people of different genders who aren't related. In addition, Jews and Samaritans simply weren't too friendly with one another. The woman named it: "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.)

There's a history there: The Samaritans and Jews have a common ancestor in Abraham. They both worshiped God. But each had an understanding of the *right* place to worship: for Samaritans, it was at the synagogue on Mount Gerazim, and for Jews, it was the Temple on the mount in Jerusalem. Reasons for the division go deeper than that: Samaritans were ones who had intermarried with Assyrians, who had conquered Israel in the 8th century BCE, and later with the Babylonians, those who had captured the Israelites and sent them into exile. So being faced with the Samaritans reminded the Jews of generations of colonization and exploitation. Being faced with the Samaritans caused the Jews to face the shame of all they had lost. Being faced with the Samaritans caused the Jews to *lose* face. Is there anyone you have ever looked at, who reminded you of a past shame?

Our minds jump to what shameful reasons this woman may have come to the well at the hottest time of day, why she had 5 husbands and was working on number six.

But Jesus neutralizes the heat of this interaction. He makes note of the woman's many marriages without judgment. He speaks to the woman plainly of earthly things, like water, and then of spiritual things, like *living* water.

As an aside, meeting a woman by the well is the biblical cliché for romantic comedy. It's where the most love stories happen. Today you might meet a romantic partner on Bumble, Tinder, Match, or eHarmony. In biblical times, the community water well served as their dating app. It's where Isaac met Rebekah; Jacob met Rachel; and Moses met Zipporah.

The best romantic comedies always pair a couple of unlikely strangers: a celebrity masquerading as a regular person with a *really* regular person; a prince with a pauper. And so when Jesus— a Jew— meets a Samaritan woman at the **well** of all places, we who have been fed

on biblical stories grab our popcorn and wait for an engagement announcement. Because we *know* how this plot goes.

Turns out, however, this woman has already been down *that* path. Five times, and she's on number 6 but it hasn't become official yet. Maybe she even met some of these husbands at that same well. *She doesn't need to get her groove back.* She's thirsty for something truly different.

Did you know that Jesus' conversation with this woman at the well is the longest conversation on record the bible shows of Jesus talking to anyone, anywhere?

Jesus knows she has been through the wilderness. He knows something about drinking water but still coming up thirsty. He invites her to a different kind of water. The power of this interaction- the power of being known- leads the woman to a new way of being.

Living water finds you in the wilderness and shows you a way out. It reminds you to hope for more than *just water*. Hope for more than Not-Egypt. It reminds you that God hopes not just for your survival, but for your abundance. That doesn't mean that you won't find hardship, poverty, or suffering. But the God who kept Moses afloat in the river Nile, and enabled him to strike a rock in the driest place so there would be a spring of flowing water, can bring you to a place where your thirst will be quenched, too.

But how do we find this living water? To do so, we need to see without judgment and we need to be willing to be seen without shame. God can help with that. I'm reading a book by Cole Arthur Riley— she's the creator of *Black Liturgies*, and her book is called *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. She points out something I never paid attention to, in that first story where God's people felt shame. After Eve and Adam had just eaten from the garden's forbidden fruit, and their eyes were opened, they saw that they were naked. And so they hid from the one who had made their bodies beautiful, and good. Riley writes, "On the day when the world began to die, God became a seamstress. When Eve and Adam eat from the tree, and decay and despair begin to creep in, when they learn to hide from their own bodies, when they learn to hide from each other...God kneels and makes clothes out of animal skin for them...when shame had replaced Eve's and Adam's dignity, God became a seamstress. He took the skin off of his creation to make something that would allow humans to stand in the presence of their maker and one another again. Isn't it strange that God didn't just tell Adam and Eve to come out of hiding and stop being silly, because he's the one who made them and has seen every part of them?"

The author continues, "Sometimes you can't talk someone into believing their dignity. You do what you can to make a person feel unashamed of themselves, and you hope in time they'll believe in their beauty all on their own."¹

I don't actually see evidence that either Jesus or the Samaritan woman in this story actually felt *shame*. Considering the circumstances, they were both pretty matter-of-fact about each of their

¹ Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*.

situations. However, each of them bore the shame that was projected on or within their communities, and the shame that divided them, one from the other— male from female, and Jew from Samaritan, holy from human. For Jesus, and how he engaged power and questioned authority, it called out shame— but people did not know where to place it, and so they put it on Jesus, and then put Jesus on the cross. But before all that happened, what Jesus did when he asked for a drink of water, and offered back a different kind of drink of *living* water, was to cast aside any kind of shame in favor of dignity. In doing so, he was able to engage communities of difference into a oneness of spirit and truth. With this woman, he set the blueprint for a church that was called to inclusivity, repair, and care.

The Samaritan woman rushed to tell that story, returning to her village and making believers out of them. They housed and fed Jesus for two days after that, and even more came to follow Jesus and engage with his teachings. “ Please give me a drink” is a pretty life-changing request.

Will you accept that engagement, to be part of the spirit and truth, the living water that Jesus offers? Consider the landscape of your life. Where are the parched places? What is shadowed in shame? What divisions are in your desert? Is there a reason Jesus might find a well right in the middle of *your* wilderness, and sit there, and ask *you* for a drink? What will you say when he *offers* you a drink, too?

As people who have been invited to drink of that living water, how will we then live differently? How will we tend to a thirsty and parched world? How will we honor the dignity of our neighbors who come from different paths? How will we tend to liberation, so that it is not a one-time event but something that needs to be tended along a lifetime? Just because we have crossed over from being enslaved— or enslavers— doesn't mean that the work of justice, of liberation, of thirst-tending is over and done.

This is a wet Sunday. But even when the font is emptied and we leave this place, even when the well is dry and a rock gushing with water is but a distant memory, even when we return each of us to our separate banks of the river, the spirit and truth remains with us: Living water flows, deeper than we can even see. It journeys with us, and will always be a Source from which we can drink, and offer drink to others.