

When the Well Runs Dry

John 4:5-42

February 24, 2008

I.

That was a long reading. It's like theological gumbo. There's a lot of stuff in there. It's fertile ground for preachers because it offers opportunities for several different sermons. It's also noteworthy because it's the longest reported conversation Jesus had with anyone in the Bible.

And it's clear that Jesus knew a great deal about this Samaritan woman at the well. He understood her, he was aware of her needs and her concerns, and he knew exactly what she was thinking.

Many men do not have that same ability. I'm reminded of the fellow who was deep in prayer, when all of a sudden he was moved to say "Lord grant me one wish". The sky clouded over and a booming voice said, "Because you have tried to be faithful I will grant you one wish."

The man said, "Thank you Lord. I would like to own my own private golf course with lifetime maintenance services and perpetual sunny weather. The first tee will be right here in my back yard." The Lord answered, "I can do that, but are you sure you want such a materialistic thing? And think of the logistics and design involved in a project that large. I also would have to relocate your neighbors just to make room. People usually ask for less difficult things. Isn't there a better choice, something not as complicated?"

The man thought a while and said, "Well, yes, there is. Lord, I love my wife, but at times I just can't figure her out. I'm not sure I know what she really thinks and how she feels inside. Sometimes she gives me the silent treatment, and says nothing is wrong. Other times she seems to cry for no reason at all. I guess I just don't understand women. Can you help me out here, Lord?"

There was a long silence, and then the booming voice spoke again and said, "What kind of grass do you want for your golf course?"

This story stands in contrast to Jesus, and how he was able to understand people. He knew he was sent by God to bring salvation and eternal life, and made that point by comparing living water to well water. And, of course, Jesus was using metaphors in the way he frequently did.

Images of water are evident in this reading. We have some of those images in our lives today. I saw a news story about the terrible drought that has afflicted parts of Georgia. Water is a precious commodity for people who live there.

On the other hand, we think back to Katrina. Many of us either had several feet of water in our homes, or else we know someone who did.

Those images of drought and flood can lead us to think more deeply about our lives and what really is important. They can help us discern the importance of earthly things and spiritual things.

In many ways, as we deal with the problems and realities of the world, our lives can be like the water in the well. We drink, but it does not satisfy us for long. We soon will thirst for more.

Jesus, however, offers us living water, the living water of salvation and eternal life that, even before we die, quenches our thirst and draws us closer to God. This is described in the well-known Psalm that says, "As the deer pants for water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." (42:1-2).

II.

With that background, let's examine the setting in today's Gospel. Jesus was at Jacob's well at high noon. This well is a real place in the Holy Land, and was dug more than 1,500 years before Jesus' time.

He was alone except for a woman, a Samaritan, who had come to draw water. The disciples had gone to buy food. And we understand from tradition that most women came to the well in the cool of the morning, but this woman might not have been welcome because she had five husbands, and was living with an man who was not her husband. Perhaps she had to get her water later in the day. She probably was an outcast among the Samaritans.

And this would have made her the worst of the worst. At this time Jews did not associate with any Samaritans, whether they were outcasts or not. Perhaps they were like Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq today. Although they shared a common faith and worshipped from the same Scriptures, Jews regarded Samaritans as ritually unclean. Part of this was because Samaritans were descendants of mixed marriages, and they rejected worship at the temple in Jerusalem. They had their own separate temple. In short, Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans, religiously, socially, culturally, or in any other way.

As a result, when Jesus spoke to this Samaritan woman, he completely disregarded established Jewish laws and traditions, and did something even the Samaritans did not do. His disciples, when they returned from the city, were shocked that he was speaking with her.

III.

Now let's look at the reading itself. It tells us that the woman came to draw water, and Jesus asked her for a drink. She was surprised that Jesus would do this, and she asked how it was that he would even recognize her presence. This gave Jesus the opening to say that if she actually knew who he was, she would have asked him for living water.

And here Jesus made a distinction between the living water of eternal life that gushes up within us, and ordinary earthly water that satisfies temporarily, but always leaves us thirsting for more.

The woman did not grasp the meaning of what Jesus said. She saw that Jesus had no bucket and that the well was deep, and she asked where he would get this living water. To summarize the reading, Jesus' explanation made clear that he was using living water as a metaphor for eternal life, and he said that those to whom he gave it would never be thirsty. He meant that the lives of people who were saved would be forever changed, both in this world and the next.

This part of the conversation then led the woman to realize and proclaim that Jesus was the Messiah, and because of her belief, many other Samaritans from the city came to the well, listened to Jesus, and believed.

IV.

This story of the meeting at the well spans the centuries to reach us today. It points beyond that city in Samaria to a larger truth of God's kingdom. It's not really a story about a woman, or Samaritans, or first century culture. It's a story about the abundance of God's grace through his Son, and its about the blessings of a new and better life in him.

But we sometimes take the abundance of this new and better life for granted. And at other times we don't even think of the living water that we have in Jesus Christ. We find it difficult to reach out and drink from the cup Jesus offers. Sometimes the well just runs dry.

It can run dry when our lives become filled with pressure and unexpected demands that leave no time for family or ourselves.

It can run dry when we learn from the doctor that the results of the test are not encouraging, or that our lifestyle must change because of our health.

It can run dry when our lives seem shallow or without purpose, or when our souls are confused and we find no peace, or when doubt or fear or anxiety seem to permeate all we do.

And the well can run dry, as it did a week ago today, when we suddenly and tragically lost a dear friend and brother, and we ask ourselves how such things can happen.

For all of us, at one time or another, in some way or another, the well runs dry. And what happens in those bone-tired moments when the road to the kingdom seems to have taken a detour; when it seems the sun hides behind clouds and the birds no longer sing?

We want to trust that God's abundance is sufficient. We want to know that in his love for us he has provided more than we need, and all we must do is just reach out.

But sometimes we ask ourselves if God really has provided. In our hearts we probably know that he has, and if we are honest we might acknowledge that we are the ones who have fallen short. In those times when we feel we have become more distant from God perhaps we should ask ourselves "who moved?"

For those times Jesus offers us what he offered the woman at the well. He offers more than water you get with a bucket or by turning on the tap. He offers the living water of eternal salvation when our lives here are over, and he offers the blessings of a life in Christ now.

And this living water, like all good things, comes to us with a cost. But the cost is an easy price to pay. We will never exceed our credit limit no matter how many times we run the card through the machine. No one is too poor to claim it.

Jesus merely asks us to accept him as he offers himself to us. He asks us to live our lives in a relationship with him, a relationship in which we might need a drink of water but in which we never really thirst. He knows that we might have droughts and floods in our lives, but he offers living water, spiritual refreshment, that can see us through whatever we might face in the here and now, and bring us to share his glory in the hereafter.

V.

The water in the well can run out, but Christ's living water always is there for us, better than ever and more than we need. And if we wish to drink from that cup of the covenant all we are called to do is turn to him, to the one who gave his life for us, and who always will be at the well for us if we but reach out to him.

It is up to us, and as we draw closer and closer to Good Friday and Easter this reality will be even more clear. Well water or living water. Worldly water or heavenly water. We can try to drink of the fallen world, or we can drink of the glorious cup that Jesus offers to us. And if we place our Lord at the center of our lives, if he is the well from which we drink, then we can know the abundance of God's grace and the lasting joy of new life in him. *Amen.*