

Lent 3, Year A
February 24, 2008

RCL
Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

The Rev Susan H. Russell
All Saints Episcopal Church

What a wealth of wonderful readings we hear this morning, on this third Sunday of Lent. Moses strikes a rock in the wilderness and water comes out of it for the children of Israel, wandering in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Psalm 95 makes mention of it, of Meribah and Massah, where God gave water.

Then Paul writes to the Romans one of his strongest passages, that since we have faith, we have peace with God and each other through Jesus Christ.

But it's the gospel passage from John on which I want to focus. Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well at high noon and she will never be the same. This is one of those great gospel stories that gives us more every time we read it. And, since she, a woman, becomes the first preacher, this is one of my personal favorites.

The story is full of remarkable things. Jesus is in Samaria, for starters. That's remarkable because Jews and Samaritans have no time for each other. They are arch enemies and have been ever since the time the Samaritans refused to participate in restoring Jerusalem after the exile. That's hundreds of years before Jesus encounters the woman, but you know how good humans are at holding a grudge.

Jesus speaks to her. Both of them know this is remarkable, because it's not "proper." She has two reasons to hide from him – woman. Samaritan. A man speaking to a foreigner and a woman is just not done!

But why is she there in the middle of the day, when it's hottest? It suggests scandal. Does she not want to face the other women, who came earlier? Does she want to avoid their whispers and their looks? We're soon to learn that she has known many men. Loose, we might call her. Does she come to the well at such an odd time hoping to meet another man? We can only guess.

Jesus speaks, asking for water, and she answers, "Is it proper for you to ask me?" And so begins their transforming conversation.

We know it will be transforming because of the symbolism used in John's gospel. Meeting him in the full light of day means she will come to understand him. Remember Nicodemus, from last week's gospel reading, who came to Jesus at night, under cover of darkness? He was unable to get what Jesus was talking about when he said "You must be born of the Spirit." The darkness was symbolic of his lack of ability to believe.

This woman, though, will get it. Like Nicodemus she begins with a literal understanding. When Jesus offers her better water, living water, she says, "How can you get it? You don't have a bucket." Some things are just not possible.

But unlike Nicodemus, she will grow. The more Jesus talks the more she is drawn into what he's saying. "If you drink the water I offer," he says, "you will never be thirsty again." This is remarkable. And it would mean less work pulling up buckets of water. She likes the idea. She keeps listening.

But now, all of a sudden, Jesus is telling her that he knows about her life. "You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." She hasn't told him. He just knows. He knows about her troubled life, maybe promiscuous, maybe filled with bad choices. But he knows. And, a remarkable thing, he continues to talk to her, teaching her about how God wants his people to worship him – in spirit and in truth, not through offering sacrifices, not just in holy places.

Jesus even tells her he is the Messiah. Why her? He doesn't tell everyone this, only his disciples, only those he knows will understand. What does Jesus see in this woman? It could be that he sees her deep desire for something lasting, for something she can count on, unlike the men in her life.

The idea that there is living water and that she will not be thirsty – soul-thirsty - for love and trust and hope – for this he must know she would do anything. Jesus must be able to see her readiness to hear what he tells her. Perhaps she is responding to the hopeful things he's saying with yearning. Perhaps he can see it in her face.

She is indeed ready to hear him because after this exchange with him she runs back to the city to tell the people what has happened to her. Now, if we're right about our assumptions concerning this woman, she is running to the very people she was trying to avoid by coming late to the well. She is not widely respected or liked or trusted, yet she goes immediately to tell people who gossip about her that they should come and meet Jesus. And they do! Maybe that's the most remarkable thing. They come back with her.

And how does she convince them to come? She says, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" Well, he hasn't, of course. He doesn't say that much about her. At least not much that's recorded in the gospel. And it would have taken all day to tell everything about her. As far as we know all Jesus mentions is her multiple relationships. But she *feels* as though he knows her through and through. And I believe that's because she knows he accepts her for who she is, a forgiven, whole, unique child of God.

Somehow she knows – perhaps she has seen it in his compelling gaze and heard it in his reassuring voice – she knows that the living water he has to give her is God's forgiveness. God's mercy. A huge weight has been lifted from her shoulders and she is transformed.

Can you imagine my delight when I saw that this scripture passage was coming up the very Sunday I planned to speak about the baptismal promise which is the answer to this question: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?"

I'm glad because I believe this story is all about Jesus' ability to bring us to see ourselves in a new way, to love ourselves because he loves us and because he is within us. Knowing this, we are able to love our neighbors more completely, too.

After talking with him, the Samaritan woman sees herself and her life in an entirely new way. He knows all she has done and yet does not condemn her for it. She does not need to pretend before him. She is able to be her true, authentic self, fully alive, and to like who she is. And that's because she has gotten an honest look at herself through his eyes. She represents all of us.

She runs to tell, not fearing the people of the village, no longer loathing herself, she is made new, worthy of living water, worthy of Christ's love, worthy to meet the Messiah, filled with hope.

What Jesus does for us is to enable us to find him within ourselves, he who knows us better than we know ourselves. And then, realizing that he loves us enough to die for us, we know that our flaws and shortcomings are forgiven and the real person behind the front we put up is loved as a child of God.

Another thing that almost escapes notice is this: When she goes to tell the people, this woman who is the first preacher in the Bible, she leaves her water jar unfilled, at the well. It's as though she doesn't need it any more. She has new knowledge and a new kind of water.

What we think we need changes when we encounter Jesus and find that he knows us completely and loves us completely and unconditionally.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons?” Knowing that we are loved and that Christ is in us, filling us with the Holy Spirit, then our relationships with other people change.

We realize that Christ is present in them, too, and we look for him in others. We will seek Christ in each other, with God's help, and as we grow in Christ we will find him more and more present in all people.
Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria