

Springs of Living Water

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year A

March 12, 2023

Text: John 4:5-42

Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park

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“Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”

The gift of water is no small thing. People around the world and throughout history have struggled to find fresh water. The ones with wells are lucky. Those of us who have fresh water piped straight into our homes are even luckier--a luxury few have had throughout the history of our planet. The Samaritan woman knew she was lucky to have the gift of a well from her ancestor Jacob, and yet retrieving water everyday was still not an easy task. The well was outside the city. We do not know how far she had to walk, but it was hard work, judging by her enthusiastic response to Jesus' offer of a new source of water, one she at first thought was a literal spring of fresh, running water. “Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” Her excitement over fresh water would be shared by many people even in our time, and especially by those who carry water everyday, who are overwhelming women and girls.

A humanitarian worker named Becky Straw, wrote the following reflection a few years ago while working on a project in rural Uganda.

I travel to some of the most desperate places on earth in search of clean water. And while the landscape changes, there's always one thing that remains the same: the women are always walking...Worldwide, women are more than twice as likely as men to collect drinking water.

Becky then describes meeting one particular woman:

Helen spent most of her day walking and waiting. She told me each day she'd say to herself, “How should I use this water today? Should I water my garden so we can grow food? Should I wash my children's uniforms? Should I use it to cook a

meal? Should we drink this water?” With two children, one husband and 10 gallons, Helen had to make choices.

“In fact,” Becky wrote, “you could see the shame on her face when she said that her children were often sent home from school because she didn’t have enough water to clean their uniforms on a given day.”

Like Helen, the woman at the well was no stranger to feelings of shame. Not for the same reasons, though. The Samaritan woman probably did not have children. If she had daughters, they would have joined her on her task, and if she had grown sons, their wives would have joined her. You see, going to get water for the day was and still is a social affair. Not only does it allow for time to catch up, but going together offers protection. Women would not risk being alone by the well for fear of being attacked. But this particular woman was by herself at a time when women did not usually go out for water. At noon, the hottest part of the day, when it would have been even harder to carry a heavy jar of water. Normally women would go out at dawn or dusk, when it was cooler and easier to carry water. So why is the woman in today’s story out at noon, when she finds herself accosted by a stranger?

We can conjecture that it’s because of what Jesus reveals in their conversation. That she has been married to five different men, and the one she is with now is not her lawful husband. She is quite likely an outcast from her community, and this is why she is by herself on an errand that is usually done socially. The respectable women of her town want nothing to do with her. Sadly, the church throughout the ages has largely seen this exclusion as justified. The Samaritan woman is often depicted as an immoral woman whose declaration of faith in Jesus is all the more remarkable because of her past. But it is important to remember that women were not free to divorce men in first century Palestine. Her five husbands either died or divorced her, or some combination of the two. And now, likely past child-bearing years, perhaps she is with a man she is not married to not because she is an immoral woman, but because he offers her some stability in an unstable situation.

Instead of shunning the woman at the well, Jesus speaks to her. In fact, this is his longest single conversation with an individual recounted in scripture. By speaking to her, he ignores not only her status as a social outcast, but also the barriers of gender, race, and religion. It was not proper for a respectable Jewish man, a religious leader at that, to speak in public to a woman outside his family. Thus his disciples’ astonishment when they return from the city with food supplies. Add to

that that she is a Samaritan, a group descended from the same Israelite ancestors as the Jewish people, but now separated by religious practice and by centuries of intermarriage with other nationalities. Jews and Samaritans alike felt hostility toward one another. The disciples were astonished, but they did not question Jesus because they already knew he had a different way of doing things.

Jesus had not only crossed boundaries to reach out to the Samaritan woman, but he also made himself vulnerable. When the scene begins today, he has been walking all morning, and he is thirsty. “Give me a drink,” he asks. In the original language, this is not a demand, but a plea. He is asking her to also look past the barriers that divide them and recognize their common humanity. Perhaps because she has little to lose, she defies social convention and speaks to this strange man, this enemy of her people.

What happens next is that she becomes his follower and the first non-Jewish evangelist in the Jesus movement. After she goes back to her city to tell people about Jesus, they are interested enough by her tale to go listen to him themselves. When they hear him, they believe, and they tell the woman, “for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Notice that they don’t say that Jesus is the savior of the Samaritans or more generously, the Samaritans and the Jews, those who share the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No, they declare that Jesus is the savior of the whole world. In fact, Jesus’ boundary-crossing is part of the work of salvation. Jesus brings healing to the world by breaking barriers that divide us, by helping us to see our common humanity. His divinity is made manifest in making us whole again, as individuals and as a human family.

You remember Helen, the woman from Uganda that Becky Straw met on a humanitarian mission? With a source of clean water in her village, she no longer had to be ashamed of not being able to do her children’s laundry.

“I am happy now,” Helen beamed. “I have time to eat, my children can go to school. And I can even work in my garden, take a shower and then come back for more water if I want!” And she also said something else: “Now, I am beautiful.” Becky was silent. “That really hit me,” she wrote. “My job,” she said, “is to focus on sustainable development, health, hygiene and sanitation...But nowhere on any

of my surveys or evaluations was a place to write, "Today we made someone feel beautiful."'

Water changed everything for Helen. The new well saved her hours of hard work and travel everyday, allowing her to better take care of herself and her family. Not only did she have an objectively better life, but she felt even more alive than before. "Now, I am beautiful." Now, I am valued. Now, I am a person. A physical well of water became a spring of living water.

As we follow Jesus in the journey to the Cross and the Empty Tomb, how can we share his abundant life, his spring of living water, with the world around us? Here at Trinity, we are blessed with many avenues to nourish people's physical and spiritual needs. If you come to the Saturday Soup Community Meal, you will be served good food, but you will also find good company. It's a *community* meal. We always tell volunteers, if you get a chance, sit down and eat the lunch you've been serving with the people you've been serving. People need food, but they also need connection. We need to be seen and valued. We need to be recognized as a person. A beautiful person. And that is who we are in God's eyes. As we come here to this altar, to the source, to the fountain, we drink from the springs of living water, and we see ourselves and one another as God's beautiful children.