

OUR STORY, IN SPEECH AND IN SONG

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent – Sunday, March 19, 2017

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops

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THEN AND NOW

There is good evidence to suggest that these long and detailed stories we are working through in John's Gospel were used in John's community for the preparation of Baptismal Candidates. They speak well to the complexities of life and of the benefits of God's love. It is thus so appropriate to move through them during Lent as we each prepare for the coming of Easter through the lens of Holy Week together.

These are big, earthy stories about real characters dealing with real life situations. Whether last week's encounter with Nicodemus, or next week's man born blind, whether the terror associated with the death of Lazarus or with this week's un-named Samaritan woman, each God-seeker finds their curiosity rewarded, in conversation with Jesus, who is simply unlike any other teacher or real-presence they will ever meet.

TWO'S COMPANY

Amidst the many details of today's story is a concise dialogue between a physically tired Jesus and an un-named foreign woman, who meet at Jacob's well, at noon. Past and present unite in this conversation which we will now hear:

Jesus 'Give me a drink'.

Woman 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'

Jesus 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'

Woman 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?'

Jesus 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'

Woman 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus 'Go, call your husband, and come back.'

Woman 'I have no husband.'

Jesus 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'

Woman 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'

Jesus 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we

worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

Woman 'I know that Messiah is coming . . . When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'

Jesus 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

THIRST

The words "give me a drink" begin our reflection with a basic human longing, a human need and human right, because to drink water is to live. I don't know about you, but I am a water drinker; always have been. I drink for refreshment, for fun, for the taste and feel, for comfort and for fortitude. I cannot recall having gone without water for even a few hours, ever.

I can barely imagine how Christians in South Sudan (where we have a sizable Anglican population) would react to these words. *I thirst* is beyond language for those enduring famine and drought; it is a potential death-rattle. In a few weeks' time we will hear identical words from the crucified Jesus on the cross "I am thirsty." Unwavering, unfettered, relentlessly faithful to the One he calls *Father*. Still . . . thirsty!

John always talks on multiple levels of consciousness and experience. The adjective *living* added to the noun *water* shifts the conversation without forgetting the basic physical human need. To thirst for water *which never*

runs dry is to enter the realm of the meta-physical, to what Jesus describes as *spirit and truth*.

So there is a pull exerted or acknowledged here. There is a demand on our affection, our commitment, our creativity, our imagination. Something similar to what we already know or enjoy or endure is promised though not yet grasped or possessed. This new life, *living water* is somehow inexhaustible and available. It satisfies, and is satisfying in every sense of the word and image.

Such a yearning poses the question for me: Where do I want to go? How will I get there? How will Jesus aid me in my journey? If I sound restless, well I guess I am. Augustine's words "our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you O God" make sense to me personally. That said, I begin to discover my priority and life-direction by asking myself the question, for what do I thirst?

I enjoy attention, and affection, and confidence, and refreshment, and success, and stimulation, and community, and justice and lots of other things. To what end however do each and all of these contribute to a wonderful life? For me? For us? For all of creation? If I think of my life, or our life together as a cup (Joyce Rupp does good things with this image) how might I wish this cup to be filled.

SONG 1

I still like the old Gospel song:

Like the woman at the well, I was seeking
For things that could not satisfy.
And then I heard my Savior speaking—
"Draw from My well that never shall run dry."

Fill my cup, Lord; I lift it up Lord;
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul.
Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more.
Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole.

Some will say that such a self-centred approach to faith is vain-glorious. And they'd be right. I note however that even the Golden Rule is self-centred (*treat others as you wish to be treated*). Paul's invitation to the Philippians (2:3-8) however is a better and self-less spiritual injunction:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness
and being found in human form
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

SONG 2

A Lutheran professor of homiletics, Caroline Lewis says this story is *her own story*. I don't know her life circumstances (maybe she has had five husbands) but in this particular conversation she finds her own thirst acknowledged and satisfied. Makes me think of another Gospel song:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long;
this is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long.

So I leave you with two questions to ponder:

- 1) For what do you thirst? Take some time; write it down; be honest with yourself and with God. We all thirst for something. Sometimes it's good to know where we are starting from before we embark on the journey. For what do *you* thirst?
- 2) A second questions. What is *your* story? Where does your story arise in scripture or in John's Gospel? Mine is very much in the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus in last week's Gospel. When you find your story, celebrate. While incomplete, imperfect, imprecise . . . it's *your* story. And your story is part of God's story. Wow. Good on you. Wonderful. Thank you Jesus. For being part of my story, your story, and our common story, together.