

Third Sunday in Lent  
Year A, RCL  
March 15, 2020  
North Fork Ministries  
Gospel:

**John 4:5-42**

*Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.*

*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "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.) Jesus answered her, "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." The woman said to him, "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 said to her, "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." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."*

*Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "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!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "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 worshipers 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." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."*

*Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.*

*Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."*

*Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."*

+++++

The summer of '64 was especially hot and dry in Central Texas, but then again, so was every summer. But that summer was hot enough to turn our stock tanks into mere puddles, where the cattle would stand endlessly, knee deep in the mud, sipping the murky water, cooling their toes. The shallow well that we depended on to irrigate our vegetable garden could be relied on to pump water for less than an hour a day – providing barely a sip for the thirsty melons and beans and tomatoes planted in the sandy loam.

So Dad decided that the water sands that replenished the shallow well would flow more freely if the well was cleared of the silt that had collected at the bottom. Standing in the harsh Texas sun, peering over the edge of the well, into the infinite blackness below, and hearing my Dad describe the process we would use to lower me to the well's depths, I felt the same trepidation that Isaac must have known when he made his way to a mountaintop with his father Abraham to offer a sacrifice to Jehovah and, then, noticed that they hadn't brought a sheep.

Still, I was an obliging and adventurous son, and my Dad wasn't the kind of man a boy argued with. Shirtless, wearing my oldest sneakers and a pair of cutoff jeans, Dad weaved a nylon rope through the belt loop of my jeans and tied it securely. It was, as we called it, a shallow well, but from above, the dark bottom thirty feet below was nothing more than a promise. Rock climbing, years later, I learned that the technique was called repelling, but at the time, leaning backwards into the well, clasping the rope in my hands, watching my Dad slowly feed me the line... I can only call it trust.

As I watched the mouth of the well grow smaller and felt the temperature drop, I was enveloped by the darkness. And then, faintly at first and later more clearly, I could hear the drip, drip, of the water falling from the well's sandstone lined walls and splashing below. By the time I arrived at the bottom, my eyes had adjusted to the darkness and I took a tentative first step into the mire. To my relief, I only sank to my knees. I untied the rope, my lifeline, and Dad pulled it to the surface above and lowered a shovel and pail. The two of us worked for hours. I would fill the bucket with mud and Dad would haul it to the surface, empty the contents, and lower it again.

The coolness inside the well offered a reprieve from the hot afternoon sun. In the womblike darkness, illumined only by a distant circle of blue sky, framing my father's attentive face, I grew content. The task of filling the bucket with wet sand and waiting for its return was rhythmic and soothing. The stillness around me was complete. And as the work progressed, the water began to flow more freely. Drips slowly turned to trickles and the rancid muck at the bottom of the well began to clear, and the hard sandstone bottom became visible again.

Dad hauled me up from the bottom of the well. We showered and had supper and allowed the underground spring to replenish itself overnight. The next morning, standing beside the well, passing the hose between us, the water flowed clear and cool. Carrying the hose to the garden, we watched as the water flowed rapidly between the garden's furrows and brought the parched earth to life.

Standing beside the well with the Samaritan woman, Jesus offers her living water. Since ancient times, this Samaritan woman, has been offered up as an example of a wretched sinner, who eventually turns her life around. I think that it's time that we revisit her. She has often been considered insolent, disrespectful. Her reply to Jesus' offer to provide her with "living water" – "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep," has been deemed by commentators throughout history as an example of her snideness and sarcasm. But have you ever noticed how a man's eloquent remark or clever retort, when spoken by a woman, gets her labeled as a shrew or worse. Biblical writers have not often been kind to women.

John tells us that the Samaritan woman has five husbands. Our knee-jerk reaction is to consider her a "loose woman" or at best someone who doesn't take the sanctity of marriage seriously. But let's keep in mind that in first century Samaria, a wife had no legal right to divorce. A husband could divorce his wife at any time, for any cause. Five different husbands could have used her and cast her aside. Or, considering the harshness of life in the first century, she could have been widowed five times. Whatever her marital history, she came to the well thirsty, the barrenness of her existence leaving her parched and brittle, receptive to talk about "living water."

This story is ripe with ancient and preconceived notions about race and gender. Jews and Samaritans refusing to help one another. Clear boundaries between the sexes – with rigid roles for each. Jesus, forever crossing boundaries, violated the racial and sexual mores of the time by even talking to a Samaritan woman. But it's not just that Jesus talked to the woman at the well. He revealed himself to her. And in the process she discovered who she was as well. She wasn't merely a drawer of water. She discovered that she wasn't the chattel of five husbands, she was a woman with a mission. In the face of Christ, she discovered living water and so she left her water jar behind, went to the city, and began to spread the good news.

This isn't just the story of a bad woman turned good. It's the story of every woman and every man. Everyone of us who has tried to quench our thirst with something less than living water. It doesn't take long to notice the dryness of human existence, no matter how many times we go to the well and draw water. Sometimes we have to go down into the well, penetrate the depths of our soul, maybe live in the darkness for a season, clear out the muck, and allow the living water to flow around us.

The magnitude of this story, the way the plot races along so quickly, almost takes your breath away. Christ's full identity is revealed in a single conversation. A simple woman comes to the well for a pail of water, has an encounter in which Jesus reveals to her a mission he has not disclosed to his closest disciples, and she goes away transformed, sharing the news of her remarkable meeting. The dryness of her former existence, swept away by a flood of love and acceptance. With the experience of seeing herself as Jesus saw her, not as a despised foreigner, not as a lowly, discarded woman, but as a respected human being. Lifted up with the rising water of a replenished well, she became Christ's unnamed apostle. She left her water jar behind and became a vessel herself, carrying the gospel within and sharing the good news with all in need of redemption.

These are parched, dry times. I can't tell you how sad it makes me not to be in church with you today – so that we could worship together in the midst of this crisis, and as a community draw from the living waters of a replenishing well. My prayer is that we will soon again drink of those living waters together.

As often happens in times of despair, the psalmist points the way forward.

- 1 Come, let us sing to the Lord; \*  
let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.
- 2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving \*  
and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.
- 3 For the Lord is a great God, \*  
and a great King above all gods.
- 4 In his hand are the caverns of the earth, \*  
and the heights of the hills are his also.

5 The sea is his, for he made it, \*  
and his hands have molded the dry land.  
6 Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee, \*  
and kneel before the Lord our Maker.  
Amen.