

Sermon for Lent 3, the Woman at the Well, March 12, 2023

Have you ever been really thirsty? When Charles and I first moved here, in July, almost 3 years ago, we decided one beautiful, hot, sunny day that we were going to take a break from unpacking and explore the woods behind our house. So we set off and we found a path that led down to Colpitt Lake. So lovely. Then we followed the lakeshore and found another path that led alongside a stream to Williams Lake. And once we got to the mouth of the stream, we thought there must be a path along the lakeshore leading back to more or less where we'd started. We looked at Google maps and we'd come 2 sides of a triangle and so we thought we'd go along the lakeshore and find the third side.

Took a while but we found the path. It followed along Williams Lake and then it struck off into the woods in the direction we wanted to go so off we went. Well after a while, the path petered out. But we knew we were going in the right direction so we kept going, bushwhacking. It's pretty open woodland there. A few logs to clamber over. We came to a cliff covered in bushes. No chance of getting up. By this time, it's nearly noon on a hot hot day and our water was long gone. Of course, we'd brought water bottles with us. But we hadn't counted on such a long hike. Or such a clambering over logs type hike.

As we worked our way along the cliff, trying to find a way up, I was getting more and more tired and thirsty. And grumpy. We might even have started arguing about the best way to go. Going back would have taken much longer, so we pressed on, getting scratched by the bushes and getting thirstier and thirstier and shorter and shorter tempered. Finally, we found a gap, a way up, sort of. Charles had to push me because it was so steep, and then found a path that led to another path that looked vaguely familiar and then to one we definitely recognised: the one we'd started at! Yay! We were no longer lost! We were still thirsty, though, and had another 10 minutes to go.

First thing I did when I got home was tromp right into the kitchen in my dirty boots and have a long, cold, clear glass of water. Oh, that felt good! Then I had another one. Then I went back and took off my boots. And swept. And had another glass of water. There was nothing like that beautiful water when I was feeling so hot and thirsty. And it took away the bad mood, too.

When you're thirsty, there's nothing like water. This is why I've always sympathised with the Children of Israel in this story we read today. They're in the desert, wandering around. God has brought them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and given them manna and quails, but they have no water and they're wandering around the Sinai Desert and there's no indication that there's any water anywhere, or any sign of this promised land Moses told them about. And they think they're going to die. And their tempers are flaring. So they go to Moses and say, "What? You didn't like the graves in Egypt? You had to bring us out here to die? We need water!" Moses says they're testing the Lord, but frankly, I don't blame them. They were thirsty. They did need water. I suppose they might have trusted God more after all they'd seen. They might have asked more nicely, but still, I sympathise with them. It seems God did, too, as he gave them water.

Then we have today's gospel story. I wonder if you know how shocking this story would have been to the Jewish audience of the day? Jesus is going back from near Jerusalem to Galilee and he goes through Samaria. Really observant Jews went around Samaria because they saw them as unclean, faithless people who weren't true Jews. They didn't associate with them. Jesus goes right through Samaria. He sends his disciples off to buy food (another no-no) and waits for them at the well. A woman comes to draw water, at a very odd hour of the day. Mostly women went for water in the cool of the morning or evening, not at high noon. Remember they had to carry those huge jars back to town with them. Most people think that she was a bit of a social outcast and found it easier to go when the other women wouldn't be there. Nothing too surprising there, since we find out later that she has had 5 husbands and is now living with someone she's not married to. In a small town, as I'm sure you know, that would be reason enough for the other women to shun her.

Jesus asks her for some water. This is shocking in a lot of ways. First of all, Rabbis didn't talk to women in public. Second, Jews didn't associate with Samaritans. Third, Jews didn't drink from the same vessels Samaritans used. The woman is clearly shocked. But they get into conversation and Jesus offers her living water. She doesn't understand. She's thinking of not having to get water every day. So Jesus tells her to call her husband. She doesn't exactly open up to him. She just says she doesn't have a husband and then Jesus shows that he knows all about her history – and he's still talking to her like a normal person, still willing to give her this living water, still being friendly.

Imagine what that might have been like for her. She's probably a social outcast and here is this Jewish man, who by all the normal social rules wouldn't have even deigned to notice her existence. First he's made himself a bit vulnerable by speaking to her and asking a favour of her. Then he offers her living water. Then he shows he knows all about her and he's still talking to her like an equal. This is probably the first time this woman has had this experience in her whole life. And she likes it. And it opens the way for what follows.

Once she has been affirmed as a person, and she has realised Jesus is a prophet, what is the most pressing question she wants to ask him? What is her top concern? She wants to know how to worship God properly. She wants to know if their worship of God is acceptable. She is waiting for the Messiah to come to assure her of these things. That isn't what I would have expected of such a woman. She has some remarkable depths, probably not suspected by anyone who knew her. But Jesus sees them. And he draws them out.

And since it's Women's Ministry Sunday, I'll just point out that she then goes off to do the work of an evangelist in her home town. And she does it so well that the people who normally wouldn't give her the time of day, go out to meet Jesus. And they invite him to stay with them and he does, another shocking thing. A Jewish rabbi staying over with a bunch of Samaritans, sharing their roof, their food and so on. And that's pretty typical of Jesus. He looks past all that stuff and sees the real people and their real needs and real potential.

And he offers them living water, a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. I always picture a fountain of love and joy and laughter and courage and all those good things, springing up within me, within us all, and splashing all around on everyone around us.

What did that woman really need? What did she desire? Acceptance, validation, respect, from another human being. And when Jesus disarms her by giving her these things, she desires at an even deeper level to know that her worship was acceptable to God, to know that God loves her.

What is it that we desire? When we have the food and water we need to live, a safe shelter to live in, what else do we desire? What do we thirst for, long for? What does our heart long for at its deepest level? If you came face to face with someone you suspected was the Messiah, what might you ask of him? Or her?

I've desired a lot of different things in my life. When I was younger, I yearned to have children. That longing has been satisfied, I'm happy to say, with 3 fine kids, all now fine adults. Mind you, a grandchild or two would be OK. Much of my life, at a deeper level, I longed to be able to know and serve God. That led me to doing all sorts of ministry activities, like working with youth and ecumenical ministry and leading Bible studies. Ten years ago, that led me to AST seminary to study for the priesthood. I've sometimes wondered if that was what I should have done much earlier. I don't know. We can't second guess the past.

But although I am now a priest and am ministering in a parish I love, to people I love and respect, that yearning hasn't gone away. It's still strong. I believe this is a gift God gives us, that our longing for God is never quite satisfied. Instead it keeps drawing us onward, always onward. God doesn't leave us in peace to just settle for a pretty good relationship. Instead we have this thirst in our souls to be drawn closer and closer to God all our lives.

We all have this desire, although like the Woman at the Well, it doesn't always show on the surface. Sometimes we ourselves aren't aware of it. In fact, I think our deeper desires are much the same as what she desired. To be accepted and to belong. To be loved and respected by other human beings. To be in a good relationship with God. And Jesus offers the Woman at the Well these things, and also the opportunity to do meaningful work and to grow, starting immediately. We all need these things. And Jesus offers all of us these things.

Jesus also drew his disciples into this. They would have stayed there with him. He is the role model for them and he shows them how to welcome everyone, how to accept them and love them, how to draw out their gifts. In order to do this, they had to let go of some stuff they had been taught and lived by all their lives, like "non-Jewish people are unclean outsiders," which was probably hard. We know it was hard because Acts tells us they often slipped back into their old way. We still do. The church still does.

But that deep thirst, that deep longing for God, keeps drawing us back to the source of Living Water, and allows us to grow in our ability to follow Jesus. Like Jesus, we will find our hunger and thirst satisfied for a time when we are showing people love and acceptance and watching them unfurl their petals and bloom. Just as clear, cool water on a hot, thirsty day will satisfy our bodies, so following Jesus and letting the Spirit grow Jesus' presence in us, like a fountain of living water, is the only thing that will satisfy our souls. And it will

draw others to that water. Like Jesus, like the Woman at the Well, like the disciples, this is our call. This Lent, let's drink deep from that fountain of living water that sustains us all.