

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
March 15, 2020- Third Sunday of Lent (A)
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Exodus 17:1-7 ; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; **John 4:5-42**
† May I speak in the name of our One God—
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

At this time in our community, our nation, our world, many of us fear the unknown, and are worried about illness and the present risks to our health and the health of loved ones by the COVID-19 pandemic. The reading from Romans today speaks of suffering leading to endurance and hope in God. And stories from the OT and the Gospel are about water. Remember that water is not just refreshing, but life giving! We need water in order to live; It's really important! And Jesus speaks today of something more, about living water, and says, "Anyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again... anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst again" (4.13). Let's explore living water together.

John's Gospel overflows with very powerful ironic images—that is a contrast, often humorous, between what is expected and what is actually happening—and one of the best examples is in this very passage. Neither the Samaritan woman nor the disciples understand what's going on. The characters are caught in an irony of movements that is meant to explain to us—who are the audience—how the "Word became flesh and was in the world... but the world didn't know it" (1.14f). This is because Jesus is an ironical Christ... not who the Jews expected, not what humans expect in a Savior...

Thus, confusion and ignorance abound, much like that which we are experiencing over the new virus only 3 months old, about which it seems little is known. What's going to happen?

Notice how the Samaritan woman (just like the character of Nicodemus we met last week) is so slow to move toward faith. Slow to go from darkness to light, from blindness to sight, from ignorance to knowledge, from confusion to understanding. These 'clueless' characters of John's Gospel are actually reflections of most Christian believers... of each one of us, as we move from confusion to understanding and from doubt to belief. That's helpful to us during this time of challenge.

Another remarkable aspect of this story is that it is Jesus who initiates contact with the woman at the well. Notice that it is Jesus that is thirsty! Strong images, meant to remind us that God is indeed the one who initiates contact with us, and has done so throughout history... and to remind us that when we meet a stranger, one in need and thirsty. It is essential that we try to meet their human needs, and that often it is in meeting such human needs, that we encounter God.

Yet another remarkable detail in this Gospel story is Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman, and even his presence in Samaria at all. Recall, he and his disciples have passed through the borders of Samaria on their way from Jerusalem to Galilee. In that time, Jews and Samaritans did not interact and certainly did not

socialize. The image here is that Jesus is crossing boundaries, not just geographic or national, but great social boundaries, the boundaries of religion, ethnicity, and gender. Again, Jesus initiates the conversation and interaction. He has brought his Jewish disciples into Samaria and they must interact and purchase food from Samaritans. He speaks to, God forbid, a woman! And later, he even stays there in that Samaritan town for two days. He enters into relationship with these non-Jewish outsiders! Shocking according to the standards of that day! These all reflect Jesus' inclusivity, his openness to the outsider, to the other, something often shocking to the standards of our own day! As Jesus said to the woman, "The time is coming, and in fact has already come, when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter... It's the way you are and the way you live that counts before God" (4.23).

Two final things I observe in this complex passage, have to do with the woman. The woman joyfully departs, quickly leaving her water jug (a symbol of her need... a tool for obtaining sustenance) behind. A detail perhaps meant to stress that her thirst has been quenched by Jesus, she has received living water and has had her need fulfilled. The water is a symbol of a deeper need for God's Word and God's care for us. Not only that, but she has become a disciple. She goes off to the other Samaritans and testifies to them about the great things Jesus has done for her, and they initially believe in him because of her testimony. She is an apostle; she is among the first Christian evangelists, sharing the good news of Jesus with others around her, telling them the story of the man who "told me everything I have ever done" (4.39). Everything I've done... 'and yet loved me anyway.' She shows them how she came to understand, to believe, and to know that she met God. A great example for all of us, she sees God and witnesses, she leads others to Jesus!

So, from all these random reflections, what's the take home message today, for we who are believers in Jesus, followers of Christ?

- Look around and open your eyes (be open)
- Share your experience with others. Witness to what you see, and open the eyes of others
- Cross boundaries. Be accepting of others, like Jesus, especially if they are different. Be inclusive
- Realize that God's real presence comes to us in unexpected places and at unexpected times, in unexpected ways.

Let's keep these things in our hearts and minds as we struggle with the reality of COVID-19 in our community, in our nation, in our world. Consider how and where God comes to us. For, we all thirst for living water, for the presence of God's Word and God's love in our lives. Jesus promises in today's Gospel, "the water I will give you will be an inward spring, gushing forth [from within you] fountains of endless life!" (4.14) May the coming weeks of this Lenten season find us drawing closer to Jesus, the fountain of all life. †