



The (Samaritan) woman said to (Jesus), "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (John 4:15).

3rd Sunday in Lent
March 23, 2014

First Reading: Exodus: 17:3-7

1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?"

3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

4 So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

5 The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Second Reading: Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,

4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,

5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Gospel Reading: John 4:5-42

5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "***Give me a drink.***"

8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

9 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.)

10 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.***"

11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

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

13 Jesus said to her, "***Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,***

14 ***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.***"

15 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."

16 Jesus said to her, "***Go, call your husband, and come back.***"

17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "***You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';***

18 ***for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!***"

19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet.

20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

21 Jesus said to her, "**Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.**

22 **You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.**

23 **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.**

24 **God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."**

25 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."

26 Jesus said to her, "**I am he, the one who is speaking to you.**"

27 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?"

28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,

29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

30 They left the city and were on their way to him.

31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something."

32 But he said to them, "**I have food to eat that you do not know about.**"

33 So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?"

34 Jesus said to them, "**My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.**

35 **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.**

36 **The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.** [underlined emphasis is mine].

37 **For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps."**

38 **I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."**

39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."

40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

41 And many more believed because of his word.

42 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."

Homily

The story of the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well is one that we've all heard from childhood. However, not understanding the ancient Mediterranean culture, we miss many of the most important elements of this story. And we don't understand its origin. Actually, biblical scholars tend to think this story is not an actual event in Jesus' life because there is no Synoptic evidence (the other three Gospels) that Jesus ever was involved in ministry in Samaria and, in fact, in the one reference that we have, he reportedly forbade it in his time (Matthew 10:5).

The Gospel of John which is thought to have been the latest of the four Gospels, being finalized somewhere around the end of the first century is the only one to recount this story. This Gospel is thought to have emerged from one particular community, known as the Johannine community. And in their era, in the decades after Jesus, they in fact did develop a ministry with the Samaritans. So possibly the Johannine community imported some of their own experiences overlying an original nucleus of an incident in Jesus' own ministry. The passage also seems to have been structured as a Christian meditation on Jesus' guidance in taking the woman from a state of ignorance to one of enlightenment. If you look at it closely, you will realize that Jesus and the woman each speak seven times, and she moves from a very concrete, *literal interpretation* to one in which *relationship* with Jesus is made central.

And it is also a lovely piece of cultural subversion on many levels! It appears that the 4th Gospel writer is depicting new roles for women and the transcending of cultural categories and boundaries. Women can ask questions and they can become disciples in their own right.

So, we always knew that it was somehow unusual for Jesus, a man, to be engaging in conversation with a strange woman in a public place, but the cultural no-no's were much greater than is immediately apparent. Of course, men and women lived in very separate domains in the ancient Mediterranean world. Women belonged in the kitchen and home while men manned the fields, the gate and would be found in the public marketplace. Both men and women could go to the well, but never at the same time. The men go and water their animals at a different time than the women go to draw water for the family.

In this story, we see that she seems to be the only woman at the well, because she's probably there at the wrong time, coming at noon, alone, and unchaperoned. So she is surprised when a Judean man asks her for a drink, which in itself could draw a lot of suspicion. And when she leaves Jesus to carry his message back to her people, she doesn't return to women's turf: She goes to yet another place women don't go, the marketplace, where she speaks with other men. Notice the progression in her words to Jesus: He is at first a "Judean," and "sir," then a "prophet," and then "Messiah," and finally the Samaritan village recognizes Jesus as the "*Savior of the world.*"

And in her discussion with Jesus, she asks questions that were normally reserved only for men, topics such as the disputed place of worship, the Temple or the Messiah, but Jesus answers her rather than ignoring or shunning her questions. This is a dialogue of seeking and questioning, and a learning of the true message of scripture. "All the elements of invitation, disclosure, unfolding levels of meaning, intimacy, reciprocity, and enlightenment are here for the taking."¹ She then tells village men what she's heard, and in that era as we already know, women's testimony was not readily accepted, but in this story the men clearly confirmed what she had told them, and then went on to hear Jesus for themselves.

Jesus predicts that disputes about the location of worship, and other differences between the Samaritans and Judeans would be overcome in the larger revelation of God who draws all to himself.

And we would be remiss if we did not talk about the repeated image of water through the three readings today. In the Exodus passage, an important component of salvation history for Israel is found here. Water is a symbol of salvation throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The dry climate of Palestine and the episode of the rock in Exodus 17 are an obvious pairing of human need and the source of life being from God. In I Corinthians 10, Paul uses the Exodus 17 passage as a form of Christian sacrament, even referencing the Eucharistic cup.

We should note, however, that in the wanderings in the wilderness, the seeming unending testing of the people in destitute times led to quarreling and hardening of their hearts to God. Their hardening may be seen in a preference for achieving a certainty that one knows or can know, believing that we are in charge, and a failure to appreciate *the value of darkness*. This is a necessary part of the spiritual path for both the Hebrews and Christians. The continual images seen in scripture between mountain and desert take us through knowing and speaking and through not knowing and not speaking. When Jesus comes down from the Transfiguration, he tells the disciples not to speak of what has happened. Jesus' Transfiguration parallels earlier epiphanies of Moses on Mt. Sinai and the Burning Bush, an oscillation between knowing and being in awe, accepting not knowing and recognizing one's place in the universe. And so when we come to a place of faith, it is not one of certainty, nor is it one of always knowing, of achieving a rational understanding, but it is one of accepting both knowing and the limits of knowing.

¹ Rohr, Richard (2010). **Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent**. Page 59.

Fr. Richard Rohr has said that the three monotheistic religions "...each insist on absolute truth claims in *forms of words*, whereas Jesus' truth claim was *his person* (John 14:6) and *his presence* (John 6:35 ff.), his ability to participate in God's perfect love (John 17:21-22) [*italicized emphases are mine*]."² We learn of God *in relationship*. We learn of God in scripture, but not without a prayerful interaction and context. We see in the Samaritan woman's story that she is taken from her literal understanding to an internalized spiritual understanding, and Jesus' message transcends the partisan religious groupings of his day, where he tells her and us that each group's truth claims are ultimately unimportant and not God's concern. Without experiencing the Spirit of God exemplified by the water which quenches our thirst, we will continue to define ourselves by non-essential cultural beliefs, rigidified dogma and theology, and religious formulas. We are moved by Jesus to give up Christian divisions, and to give up the presumption that we understand simply from a text. It is in *the living Christ*, a relationship with a person, that the living out of and fulfillment of scripture is seen. And Jesus tells the woman that the vision of the Kingdom is now!³

*They
wondered
if the Lord was with them
as they dragged through the desert dying of thirst.*

*God
was there
but they could not remember.*

So too with us.

*Sometimes it is so hard for us to find you
in the dry hours of our
lives.*

Please,

*be fresh water, pouring forth
from rocky days
to us.*

*Be that saving water
in Horeb
again.*

Amen.

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² Rohr, Richard (2008). **Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality**. Pages 123-124.

³ Rohr, Richard (2010). *Ibid.*, Pages 59-61.