

EXODUS 17:1-7 (p. 58)

MARCH 19, 2017

JOHN 4:5-42 (p. 863)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Come to us Lord, and sit with us for a while. Talk to us as we study your Holy Word. Touch our hearts Lord, and unbind our minds. Shower us with wisdom and truth as we reach out to you. And walk with us, please, when we leave here today—empowering each one of us to share your Living Water with a very thirsty world. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

"AT THE WELL"

When you lay our readings down, side-by-side, some obvious parallels appear. The context is different, of course. Moses is in the wilderness with the Israelites, and Jesus is in a village, alone with a woman at a well. Both stories though involve water, and thirst. And in both stories we see the quenching of that thirst. Moses provides water from a rock, or more accurately, God provides water from a rock, and the thirst of the Israelites is satisfied. Jesus simply asks for a drink, and the thirst of the woman, and ultimately that of the whole town is satisfied! And when you break through the surface, dive a little bit deeper—puns intended—when you actually delve into the depth of this ‘well of truth’, these water stories might just show you a little more! Maybe even yourself!

Both stories are really about Providence, you see. And in both stories the Lord provides for His thirsty people as they wander in the wilderness, physically and even spiritually. In both stories God shows up unexpectedly too, and pours out His love directly from Heaven. And in both stories, the People of God are surprised! Let me explain.

Moses is out in one of the nastiest, most unforgiving deserts on the face of the planet! I don't even have the words to describe it! And he has been there for several weeks. Based on dates mentioned in Exodus, I figure somewhere between thirty-five and fifty days to be exact. It's reminiscent of Jesus' forty-day testing in the wilderness, isn't it? Only there is a whole bunch of people with Moses, a crowd really, or a mob, depending on your perspective. Scholars estimate between one and half to two million former slaves have packed up everything they could carry and left Egypt on the journey of their lives!

Psychologically, they are moving from the known to the unknown—albeit from captivity, towards a future of freedom in the Promised Land! And physically, they are hot and tired, thirsty we're told, and possibly quite scared! They must have been a mixed bag of emotions, don't you think—collectively, as well as individually! And according to the text they are getting pretty darned grumpy too!

Now I'm sure you know what that's like. If you have ever moved, or even taken a long trip, you know there are always gaps between expectations and reality, right? Things don't always go as planned! Strange surroundings cause anxiety levels to grow. The unknown makes things difficult. And change, well, change is often the hardest! Now add into all that stress, being tired and hungry and thirsty. I'll bet you can visualize it, can't you, or maybe even remember! I know I can!

You see when that happens, at least in my experience, there is always someone more than willing to verbally express their discomfort! “Are we there yet?” “I’m hungry. When are we going to eat?” “Brady just touched my leg!” “Can’t we stop for a while?” “It’s hot!” “I’m tired!” “Isn’t there anything to drink?” Human nature, right! ...Now hold that visual, and then magnify it at least a thousand times, because right now everyone in the entire Community of Faith is complaining!

“They quarreled with Moses,” it says. “Give us water to drink!” “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?” They are frustrated, for sure! And I get that! But these people are always complaining it seems! In Exodus 15 they complained about “brackish water”. In Exodus 16 it was about “longing for the fleshpots of Egypt”. And here, in chapter 17, it’s about “no water at all”! ...In Numbers 11 though, it was “the manna”. They wanted “meat”. In Numbers 12 it was because “Moses married a Cushite woman”. In Numbers 14 it’s because of “Moses and Aaron’s leadership”, which happens again in Numbers 16. And in Numbers 20 it’s about “life in the wilderness” in general! These folks really like to complain!

And their leader, Moses, the guy driving the car on this particular trip, has flat out had it with the bickering kids! Let me read you an excerpt from Numbers 11, which by the way, I shared with Pastor Paul Holland at his Installation last week (Numbers 11:10-15a).

Moses heard the people of every family wailing, each at the entrance to his tent. The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. He asked the Lord, “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing at me, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I cannot carry these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, Lord, then put me to death right now!”

Emotionally, it's bad! You can probably see that. The people are stressed, and so is Moses! Many of them are terrified! This isn't a casual drive past a rest area on the highway, or an exit with McDonald's billboards. They are not fantasizing about stopping to take a potty break, or grab a Pepsi! They are in the wilderness, heading to an unknown land, with possibly what's left of the entire Egyptian Army right behind them! There is no road map to look at around the campfire at night, no Google Maps to tell them how long it will be until they get to the Comfort Inn in the Land of Milk and Honey! These people are not just asking for a drink here, they are wondering if they will ever drink again! They are starting to doubt, aren't they? They are even starting to doubt the Presence of God! “Is the Lord among us or not?” And again, I get it! But what I don't get is how short their memories are!

I mean they were just rescued from Pharaoh, from slavery right, from abuse, from making bricks without straw, from beatings and murders and such! A month or so ago they witness God's mighty hand in the plagues—the frogs, and locust, and boils, and blood. They saw these things first-hand!

These are the same people who lived through the Passover—who saw the first-born of all the Egyptians die in the night, while the Angel of Death passed over their houses! They walked through the parted waters of the Red Sea! They've eaten the manna sent by God, and later the quail! God has provided for them, again and again and again! And yet here they are, grumbling!

How quickly we forget, don't we! Maybe you can think of times or places in your life that should be called Massah or Meribah? Massah, when you tested God! Or Meribah, when you quarreled with others, or simply outright complained? Think back, it probably wasn't that long ago! But wasn't the Lord actually there with you? Didn't He come and provide anyway, maybe not exactly what you wanted at the time, but certainly what you needed! Weren't you cared for there in the wilderness? ...Where you surprised? ...Are you now, as you think back? ...The Lord came to the Israelites even in the midst of their selfish unbelief! That's profound! And provided exactly what they needed!

Jesus isn't searching for water in our Gospel lesson. He is sitting right next to a well, one dug by the Patriarch Jacob, one that has produced fresh water for hundreds and hundreds of years! In fact, Jesus isn't really searching at all. He and His Disciples have crossed the desert on a trip out of Jerusalem. It's now noon, the sixth hour, and the sun is directly overhead. The temperature has steadily risen since morning, many degrees! They are hot and dry, that is a fact! But notice that it's a local woman who actually thirsts, spiritually, a Samaritan. And it's her whose thirst is quenched! ...A little more background.

To First Century Jews, Samaria was the “wrong side of the tracks”! Granted, these people were originally distant cousins. But after Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C., things drastically changed! The Assyrians deported most of the locals, and repopulated the country with people from other conquered lands. The thought was that this would quell any further rebellion! And it makes sense! If people don’t agree, politically or socially, there is no way for them to move forward together as a cohesive group! And politically, right now, this is a mixed-up mess of folks! It sounds like America, doesn’t it!

Religiously, however, things are even worse! The intermingling of cultures has brought pluralism to the local religious traditions. So to the Jews, these Samaritans have some pretty strange ways of worshipping God! They do church in all the wrong ways! They have responsive readings for Invocation and Prayer! They “dunk” the communion bread, instead of passing it—or hold the cup until the very end! Picture Congregationalists trying to agree with Catholics on church hierarchy! Imagine Baptists arguing with Methodist over how to do Baptism! Picture the First Service Praise Team and the Second Service Choir picking out each other’s music, or the Hospitality and Property Committees arguing over tables and chairs! “They see things differently! So obviously they are wrong!”

And in this time period, women and men never talked in public, ever, not even a husband and wife. It just wasn’t done! And women always wore the traditional Hijab, or head covering we still see in parts of the Middle East today. Or maybe even a Burqa, the one

piece head-to-toe wrap common in Afghanistan.

What's more, women only came to the village well together, as a group to gather water—and only in the early morning or late afternoon! No respectable woman would ever come alone! No respectable woman would ever come at noon! And no respectable woman, under any circumstances what-so-ever, would ever talk to a stranger, especially a strange man! But here she is! A woman alone, talking to Jesus in the middle of the day!

On top of that, this woman has a pretty checkered past! In a time when divorce was almost unheard of, not to mention against the law, this woman has had five different husbands! And now, she is living with a man to whom she is not even married! Can you believe it! This woman is obviously the village hussy, right! People undoubtedly talk behind her back, which may explain why she is coming to the well alone, and at noon. None of the other “respectable” women would want anything to do with her, would they! She is a tramp, an outcast! Even on this side of the tracks, a woman like that has to be shunned, right? And that, notice, makes Jesus’ offer of God’s love and acceptance, even more astounding, doesn’t it!

Notice also, that this woman isn’t exactly looking for Messiah at the moment. Nor does she seem to be in a particular quandary about her marital status. She is here for water, not theological instruction, or even help. She is in the middle of her everyday routine, her regular life, going about whatever, when Jesus meets her at the well! She is thirsting all right, in the very depths of her soul, but she doesn’t even realize it! And God provides anyway!

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever been in the wilderness and didn't even know it? Was there a time when you were thirsting, parched maybe, but not aware that you craved the Water of Life? It could happen like a "Thief in the Night," Jesus says. When you least expect it, when you aren't even looking for it, the Lord could show up! We often equate that thought with the Second Coming at the End of Time. But it applies to Blessings too, doesn't it, and to God's Holy Presence! The Lord comes to those who thirst, but also, to those who don't realize they do.

God comes to the "grumblers" and "complainers", and to those who are simply living life—and provides for our every need! The Lord approaches outcasts, those of us on "the wrong side of the tracks," those who others reject, those who are less-than-perfect—and brings us a cold Cup of Salvation! He says, "Believe in me, turn to me, accept me, as your Lord, receive this Spring of Living Water, and it will well up to Eternal Life!"

You know I hope that we can see ourselves in these texts. I know I can. So now the only question I guess is, "How should we respond?" What do we say to Grace? How do we answer to all of the Blessings that are constantly showered upon us? How should we live, as individuals, as families, as a church, knowing that Almighty God provides for us, again and again and again! We have all been given life! And we have all received bounty far in excess of what we deserve, the greatest of which is the Holy Spirit and the promise of Eternal Life! So what is that worth? How do you answer that? How do you say thanks?

Well one option, I guess, would be to keep complaining. I mean, there is a biblical precedent. We could scream at our leaders too, if we like. But trust me it will only drive them to their knees, like it did Moses. I guess we could stubbornly start to doubt maybe—there is a precedent for that too—even doubt if God is with us or not! That's certainly a choice! However, in other parts of Exodus, I do see God getting fed up with that after a while!

Or I guess we could celebrate, and do it with the joy—like the Samaritan woman, giving thanks to God! We could share what God has done for us, and with us, you know, tell the entire village even! We could invite them to come and see for themselves! Evangelism 101! We could live our lives, and speak our hearts, in such a way that we make God Famous! We could actually be the witnesses that God has called us to be! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful God, we wander through the deserts of life, thirsting for satisfaction, looking near and far for that which will make us feel complete, and fill the void. Yet we journey in vain for this illusive sense of fulfillment, until we finally come to you. We strive to satisfy the urges and desires of our flesh, only to feel the emptiness of our spirit. We try to medicate ourselves with food, with money, and with possessions, only to realize just how sick we still feel. We attempt to manage on our own, only to find that alone, we simply cannot do it. Yet we rejoice, even then, for it is when we are driven to our knees that we finally stop striving for ourselves, and hear that still, quiet voice gently calling our name. It is when we admit that we are lost that we actually start to find our way.

Lord, today we admit that we are lost. We stand in your presence, here in your sanctuary, asking for your guiding hand. We have stepped out of the world and into your Throne Room of Grace requesting your Holy Spirit as our source of comfort and strength. And we willingly lay down our swords and our personal battles now, and take up the Cross of Christ in his mission to the world.

As Jesus prayed for his loved ones, Lord, we now pray for ours. We lift up before you..... We pray that you will touch each of their spirits with your Holy Spirit, granting peace and healing and Grace upon their lives. We pray that you will shower your blessings over their entire lives. And we ask that you will guide your people Lord, each of our loved ones as well as ourselves, as we strive to hear the direction that your voice is calling us to journey. Give us wisdom and discernment as we

attempt to be your faithful followers in Jesus' Name. And hear us now as we pray together the very prayer that He taught us, saying, Our Father...