

Thirst for Water

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Texts: *Exodus 17:1-7; John 5-42*

Lent is a time when people create a sense of want by withholding life's pleasures – dinners out, chocolate, texting friends. For some, though, Lent is an all too real every day experience of deprivation, seeing no way out. So, it is fitting this 3rd Sunday of Lent to contemplate the experience of want, and its influence on how we encounter God.

Today's scripture passages have in common a thirst for water. As I dwelt on these texts what came to mind were words from – not Bach or Mendelsohn or a loved hymn – but an iconic Western song about an old man and his mule, Dan, and a mirage in the desert. I'm not sure how many know the western genre of music, let alone love it. It's often dismissed as 'hokey,' and much is; yet, millions are attracted. What attracts is that in the midst of hokiness are gems of life experience that evoke pathos and emotion in a primal way.

All day I've faced a barren waste
without the taste of water _ cool water.
Old Dan and I _ with throats burnt dry
And souls _ that cry _ for water _ cool, clear, water¹

'Souls – that cry – for water,' what could be more primal? Without water, we die! Anyone who has spent time in a desert, or on great arid plains – or even if you've just imagined it – anyone, can identify with this man and his mule crying for water.

But, there is a deeper pull. Subconsciously the lyrics and music stimulate emotional memories tying the cry for water to a cry for spiritual wellbeing. Subliminally we're reminded of scriptures in our dim memories: 'as the deer pants for water, so my soul pants for you, oh God' (Ps 42:1) comes to mind; or, 'the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb' (Rev 22:1). Even the name of the mule, Dan, suggests a tribe of Israel, and the old man must surely be named 'Abe' or 'Jake' or 'Joe' or other Bible name – even to people with little Bible knowledge.

Front and Back Stories

This evocative song captures the essence of the Biblical texts we read today. They link our primal thirst for water to a deeper spiritual thirst – an echo of what Lent is all about.

1. In the Wilderness. The front story of our Exodus text opens with the Hebrew people in the wilderness, complaining they'll die of thirst. These descendents of 'Abe' and 'Jake' and 'Joe' escaped slavery in Egypt and crossed the Red Sea through a series of miraculous interventions, and are now in the Sinai. Moses, the instrument of deliverance, is their target. Moses, in turn, deflects the complaints to God: "Lord, what shall I do?" God, hearing the complaint as legitimate, responds with another miracle – water from a rock when Moses strikes it with his rod, his walking stick. At a literal level, the Hebrews had a real problem - without water in the middle of nowhere they faced death. In that sense, the story is about God's divine presence in the face of need.

¹ Written by Bob Nolan in 1936.

But, there is a deeper back-story. This isn't the first time they've complained. They'd despaired of life while slaves in Egypt, wanting to get out. God sent Moses to lead them, providing plagues and other protection as they escaped Pharaoh and his armies. Yet, once across the Red Sea they began complaining again; first, in the wilderness of Shur when they found bitter water (15:24). Hearing their complaint, the Lord turned bitter water to sweet. They moved to the wilderness called Sin where they faced famine, and complained: "Moses, you led us out of Egypt," they said, "we would rather have died there. At least there we could eat our fill" (Exodus 16). Again God heard their cry, and provided nourishment in the form of manna and quail. Then they moved to wilderness of today's text, Rephidim, and again they're complaining: "why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (17:3). One would think they'd be able to remember how God had supported them in previously. One is tempted to say: "what a bunch of ingrates!"

As to Moses, he takes the complaints personally. He's tried hard, really hard, to be a good leader, to be faithful to God's call for his life. Was challenging pharaoh easy? Think being a leader is easy when your back is against the Red Sea and pharaoh's chariots are stirring up a dust storm? Think leading a large crowd of stiff necked, opinionated distant cousins through the wilderness is easy without a map to the Promised Land? And, now he's accused of leading them to death by thirst! No wonder he's upset. So he does a very human thing – he tries to guilt them. "Why do you find fault with me" he asks ('after all I've done for you', he implies)? And, he ups the stakes, invoking a higher power: "Why do you tempt the Lord and try His patience?" (v. 2). But Moses, too, has a short-term memory problem. He's forgotten that God cares for his people – and, also, that God protected him, Moses.

We might say, then, that both the Hebrew people and their leader, Moses, are wrestling with deeper spiritual matters – not just the literal thirst for water. The Hebrews have only a vague idea of what it means to be a people of *Yahweh*, the true God in the midst of all the idols around. For them, this is a teachable moment. For Moses, it is a continuing challenge to understand that God's Divine Presence is available in times of crisis. That's one way of reading this.

Or is this a story about us? Is it about our amnesia, our wavering faith in God's presence when we face times of trial? We humans can be awfully fickle!

2. *At Jacob's Well.* The front story in the Gospel of John is more personal. Here it's Jesus whose throat is parched. He's walked a long way across the highland ridges of Samaria, about 50 km. from Jerusalem as the crow flies –much longer when you walk the roads; and, at the sixth hour, at noon, gets to Jacob's well. With no bucket at hand, he sits and waits.

I've had opportunity to be in the West Bank. Jacob's well is near Nablus, at the entrance to a mountain pass of an ancient trade route cutting through the highlands from the Mediterranean to the Galilee. When Jesus arrives he's about half way to his hometown Nazareth. The highlands are mountainous, rocky, dry; and, in summer, very hot – good mostly for scraggly olive trees and goats. He could have avoided the highlands as most in his day did, travelling around by way of the Jordan River valley because it was safer and water was available. It also avoided contact with the Samaritans. There was bad blood between them for centuries – each claiming theirs as the true expression of worship of the God of Abraham and Jacob. Each taught their own to avoid the other. For some unexplained reason Jesus felt it necessary to go through Samaria. (4:4)

As Jesus waits, a Samaritan woman comes to get water, and he asks for a drink; and, the story takes an interesting turn. Rather than simply saying 'no', or doing as he asks, she gives a cheeky response. To paraphrase, she says: "you're a strange dude to ask me for water. I'm a woman, and I'm a Samaritan – you're not even supposed to talk with me." Nothing shy about her! She's clearly aware of the social boundaries meant to keep her in place, and is not about to be cowed.

Jesus isn't taken aback. Rather, he responds: "if you knew who you were talking to, you'd ask for living water" – shifting the conversation about literal water to a spiritual one. It takes her a little while, but she catches on. She begins: "without a bucket, how can you provide me living water? Where would you get this living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?" This time she's challenges Jesus' authority over and against the ancestors of her faith (4:12). His response: "all who drink this living water won't be thirsty again," prompts her to ask for some. At a literal level, it might mean she wouldn't have to get water from the well so often. But, as soon as the woman asks, the conversation turns to her personal life. Jesus knows of her many marriages – later she tells her neighbors he told everything she had ever done. That of course is hyperbole, but what Jesus knew was dramatic. It's at this point she understands the spiritual question. She immediately understands him to be a prophet and asks him a serious question about worship to which he gives a serious answer.

What is the backstory? Who is this woman? She has no name; yet, the very length of this conversation with Jesus, one of the longest in all four Gospels, tells us it is important.² Some commentaries reduce this encounter as revealing Jesus' concern for outsiders. "See, Jesus did not come for important people of the world like Nicodemus, but for the no-names, the down-trodden," and, as some older commentaries suggest, "the five-time losers."

But, that diminishes the importance. She may have had 5 former husbands, and was living with someone unwed, but she's not some fallen woman. Jesus doesn't say to her "Go and sin no more" as he does to the woman accused of adultery (8:1-11). Instead he speaks to her of worship in spirit and truth; not worship confined to social rules based on gender, or ethnicity, or even geography and conventional morality. She may be a victim of difficult circumstance, but she's an intelligent and skilled debater, skillfully articulating the differences between Samaritan and Jewish cultures. Jesus neither rejects, nor judges, nor blames the woman; quite the opposite – he praises her for telling the truth about her situation. And, she's not a woman who isn't listened to by others. When she rushes back to her village, the people listen to her and go out to see this Jesus – returning later to say "Now we no longer believe (trust, have faith) just because of what you said; for we have heard Him ourselves [personally], and we know that He truly is the Savior of the world, *the Christ*." (v. 42)

Perhaps the extraordinary aspect of this text is not simply that Jesus is *for her*, but that she becomes a witness *for him*. It's about transformation. Here is a person constrained by social roles and rigid assumptions of her society, caught and seeing no way out – and through this encounter with Jesus she is transformed into a witness to the very people who had sought to keep her in her place. The effect of the encounter was to introduce Jesus not

² Jo Ann Davidson (2005). John 4: Another look at the Samaritan woman. *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 159-168.

only to the villagers of Sychar, but to other Samaritans as well – a place where we know first century churches existed.

It might also be said that the woman at the well story shows us that faith is about dialogue, about growth and change. It is not about having all the answers.

Or, could this meeting at the well really be about us, for us? Is our thirst for living water constrained by arbitrary boundaries? Are we cautious about our faith because we don't have all the answers, or are we open to understanding faith as growing through dialogue?

From Want to Living Water

How, then, does Lent and the experience of want, the soul crying for water, how does it influence our encounter with God? Today's texts speak to the experience of souls through millenia. The exodus story, according to Rabbinical history, took place more than three millenia ago. It's part of the foundational myth of the people of Israel, shaping their commitment to God. The story of Jesus' encounter with the unnamed woman at the well was about two millenia ago, and illuminates encountering God at a personal level, not mediated by high priests.

Like the Hebrew exiles, each of us is bound to encounter our own wildernesses, and may well complain to God. Is that bad? It seems not. In a sense, complaining is a form of trust, believing that God hears and cares. The Exodus account holds out the hope that one can get past the complaints, and experience God's divine presence – the living water.

The account of the woman at the well builds on this. Being a passive recipient of Jesus' good news doesn't deepen one's faith of itself, it seems. It's when we wrestle and debate our life and faith issues with Jesus, literally and figuratively, that we are renewed and receive living water for our spiritual lives.

AMEN