

### Sermon Lent 3

*“Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”*

#### I

Our Gospel reading today starts out by showing us a very human side to Jesus. “Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well.”

Remember, this was the man who could fast in the wilderness, and still resist the Devil’s temptation to turn rocks into bread! But here, we meet the Thirsty Jesus.

So Jesus is at the well, and a woman comes with her water jar. And Jesus asks her for water.

We all know the story of the Good Samaritan; and most of us know the significance of the Samaritans. They were a breakaway sect from the Hebrews, who were not observant of the Law. As such, they were considered **unclean**, and not to be associated with. But remember, it was that Samaritan who came to the aid of the “man who fell among thieves” – and went way beyond any normal expectation, to care for the injured man.

This nameless woman is also a Samaritan. And she is astonished that a Jew should ask her for water. And she is depicted as being even more astonished when Jesus apparently surmises her marital status!

A common misunderstanding of this story is that Jesus tells her she has been married five times and is currently living out of wedlock – without knowing her beforehand. She then recognizes him as Christ, and she rushes off to tell others, shouting, “Come and see the Messiah!”

Five husbands seems a bit much, even for those days!

But there has been some controversy over this common translation of the story. The Greek word “*Kyrios*” means “Lord” – remember, when we pray “*Kyrie eleison; Christe eleison; Kyrie eleison*” we are saying “Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy; Lord have mercy.”

But in those patriarchal days, the same word was also used for “husband” and “master”. So let’s go a little deeper.

The background to the Samaritans is that in the days of Hosea, they had abandoned the Jewish faith., “They went after false gods and forsook all the commandments of Yahweh.” (2 Kings 17:15-16) They fell into the hands of the king of Assyria, who brought in peoples from five different regions to occupy Samaria. These five tribes worshipped, and built shrines for their own gods. (2 Kings 17:24, 29-31) The Samaritans began worshipping these false gods, and so drifted from the one true God.

So, perhaps think of the message more as: “**You Samaritans have worshipped five false gods, and the god you are now worshipping is not your True God!**”! As theologian Philip McLarty has suggested, Jesus isn’t talking about the woman’s husbands; he is talking about the Samaritans’ **idolatry**. He’s not asking her, “Whom have you been sleeping with?” but “whom do you worship?”

The churches of the day were rather tribal in nature; tied to family groups and geographic areas. So, the Jews and Samaritans had established their own centres of worship. The sacred mountain for the Samaritans was Mount Gerazim. The sacred mountain for the Jews was Mount Zion, and their Temple was in Jerusalem.

So, the woman’s first assumption is that Jesus – a Jew – is rebuking her for worshipping false gods up in the mountains, rather than Yahweh, down at the Temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus explains that “the hour is coming when you will worship the Father **neither** on this mountain **nor** in Jerusalem.”

So it won’t matter **where** you worship, but rather that you “...worship the Father in spirit and truth.” The one true God.

And so today, we will confess our membership in “**one** holy, catholic, and apostolic church.... **one** baptism for the forgiveness of sin.” And that is what Christ is offering; not just reconciliation between Jews and Samaritans, but a new deal for everyone!

I’m not quite sure that’s what his Apostles were expecting when they first started to follow him. But while they “were astonished that he was speaking with a woman” – they didn’t interfere!

## II

Before today's story begins, John's Gospel tells us that Jesus "left Judea, and departed into Galilee. He needed to pass through Samaria." (John 4:3-4)

There are two ways to get from Judea to Galilee. One takes you up the Jordan River Valley. It's soft and flat. The other takes you through Samaria. It's rocky and mountainous. To borrow a line from Robert Frost, Jesus took, "the road less traveled by. And that has made all the difference!".

I talked about this last week – going into the mountains and the desert. As the hymn puts it:

“Not forever by still waters / would we idly rest and stay / But would smite the living  
fountains / From the rocks along our way.”

So, in one sense, Jesus didn't **need** to pass through Samaria in a geographical sense – but it was part of his journey **out** of the Hebrew world.

And his journey has brought him through the barren and rocky lands, to this particular well.

In the Old Testament, Sychar was where Jacob first met Rachel. Hence, "Jacob's Well".

(Genesis 29) Back when Jacob met Rachel, the Jews and Samaritans were one people. They shared a common faith, a common heritage and a common devotion to Yahweh. It was back in the days before they went their separate ways.

So, in a sense, Jesus came back to where it all started. Like his forefather, Jacob, he came here with a proposal; but not a marriage proposal! His offer has to do with reconciliation – to reconcile the world with God. (2 Corinthians 5:19) And the reconciliation of Jew with Samaritan was a start.

Jesus explains that he isn't really talking about water, but the New Creation. The water is the water of eternal life. But, like Nicodemus in the story last week, the woman doesn't quite get it. She replies, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." For someone who has to go to the well every day to draw water, endless water, and never being thirsty is a powerful metaphor!

The woman knows about the Messiah: “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us!” And Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’” (John 4:25-26)

So, the woman left her water-jar, and ran into town shouting, “Come, see a man who told me everything that I did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:29) And as a result, John says, “From that city many of the Samaritans believed in him because of the word of the woman ...” (John 4:39)

The key point in the story is that once the woman recognized Jesus, she ran to tell others. She becomes the messenger to the Messenger.

### III

Our relationship with Christ is symbiotic. We need him – but he also needs us. We are His hands and feet. As the well-known mystic, Teresa de Avila said:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks [with] compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

The Holy Spirit can breathe on us all she likes, but if we do not respond, we cannot build the Kingdom. And so, the woman who runs to tell her friends is a vital symbol of the message of Christ! Just as Mary Magdalene would later run to tell the other Apostles about the Resurrection! And what was the Virgin Mary, carrying the incarnate Word in her womb – but another messenger to the Messenger? So, when a woman comes, bearing a message – it is perhaps good to listen!

The woman told the other Samaritans what she had seen and heard, and, because of her testimony, others accepted Jesus as the Messiah. But they weren't content simply to know **about** Jesus; they wanted to know him first-hand. And so, they came to the well to see for themselves. And, once they had their own encounter with Jesus, it was no longer just “what the woman had

told them”. They said, “...**we have heard for ourselves**, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.”

Again, this is prescient – the Apostles will later meet the risen Christ – after Mary Magdelene – and will see for themselves.

And the message of Christ – as Paul would later put it – is that there is “no longer Jew or Gentile, Man or Woman, Slave or Free.” There is no longer Jew or Samaritan, if both can recognize Christ as the universal Messiah!

#### IV

So, our Lenten journey requires us to leave the easy road along the riverbank, and to journey to the rocky places, where water must be drawn from a deep well. We must go to places where the people won't necessarily be like us. But they can still be called by God, and they can pour water for Him, and we can all – at least metaphorically – drink together from that well.

This Lenten season, we are being offered some new and unique challenges, arising from the threat of the COVID 19 virus in our communities and congregations. Our Collect is very appropriate: “Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul.”

Our Epistle today reassures us that “...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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.”

Paul knew a lot about suffering. But we should continue to hope that whatever suffering we may face will be limited by God's mercy and by what we are able to do for ourselves.

When we go forth from here, we are going back into a world of doubt and uncertainty; and perhaps, in March 2020, more than in other times. We need to take Christ's word and his promises with us, and share them with others. His work does **not** stop.

We need to ask ourselves today: if Christ comes into your midst, will you give him water? And will you help him to share the Good News?

Amen, and may God have mercy on us all.