

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

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Third Sunday in Lent, John 4:5-42

There was a woman at a well who encountered living water and her life was changed forever.

Today's gospel lesson is from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. Thus far, we have heard John's expansive prologue in which he presents Jesus as the eternal logos, the inauguration of his ministry with the wedding at Cana, the fiery cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, and his early engagement with the religious authorities. Now, Jesus returns to the northern region of Galilee but, in order to get there, he and his disciples must travel through the land of Samaria.

Samaria was inhabited by remnants of the northern tribes of ancient Israel who worshiped the Lord God and used the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures. Their sect branched from the traditional faith of the southern Jews around the time of the Assyrian exile. The principle point of conflict between Jews and Samaritans was the location of the chosen place to worship God, for the Samaritans worshiped at a shrine on Mt. Gerizim and not the Jerusalem Temple. Because of this, the people of Samaria were understood by the Jews of the time to be outsiders and enemies, and they did not acknowledge the authenticity of the Samaritan observances.

So, our story begins in this strange land. ***There was a woman at a well who encountered living water and her life was changed forever.*** This particular woman and this particular well form the center of our story today. It is quite possible that they also form the center of the Christian message.

Determining the exact center of anything can be problematic at best. With living things, the problem becomes one of intangibles: What is the center of a life? What is the center of a dream? What is the center of faith? While I was thinking about centers, I stumbled across the story of how we first determined the center of our country. In 1918, government geographers decided to find the geographic center of the United States. In order to do so, they made a large cardboard cutout shaped like the lower forty-eight states and set about the work of balancing it on a pin, until they found that single place where it balanced perfectly.

As best they could determine, the exact geographical center of the continental United States was near Lebanon, Kansas, in the middle of a hog farm. In the 1930's, the people of Lebanon wanted to erect a monument to mark this spot, but the farmer didn't want tourists tramping around on his property and disturbing the hogs. So instead, they built the monument to the exact geographical center of the United States a half mile away from the actual center. It seems that even in the pursuit of something as concrete and precise as the exact center of the land cannot escape being, in some sense, abstract and metaphorical.

Even though it can be a challenge to determine the exact center of anything, for some reason, it seems important to us to try. We seem to be driven to try to find what and where the center is. The idioms of our language attests to this: we seek the heart of the matter, the seat of the soul, what is at the center of things. We wish to get to the bottom of a situation and to find the root of it all. We strive to find the central truth and the core of our understanding. But what I think we really want is to find that *one place upon which all that truly matters is balanced.*

There was a woman at a well who encountered living water and her life was changed forever. Our Gospel lesson is about this woman and this well. It is about a woman who sought to quench her thirst only to find true and living water that changed everything. She sought reprieve and sustenance, only to find eternal life.

It was high noon on a hot day. And Jesus, tired from traveling, decides to rest at Jacob's well outside a Samaritan town, while waiting for his disciples return their trip into town for food. A woman appears with her clay jar in hand to draw water from the well. And upon seeing her, Jesus asks her to give him a drink of water. This request is remarkable because contact between Jews and Samaritans was prohibited, not to mention that men weren't permitted to address a woman without her husband present. Jesus' behavior was in violation with the Law, as well as just all-around unseemly for a rabbi. Yet, while Jesus was willing to toss out the rules, the woman was concerned. "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman," she reminded him. "How can you ask me for a drink?" (4:9)

Jesus answers her question with this: "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. ... Everyone who drinks of [the water from the well] will be thirsty again, 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." (4:10, 13-14) To this remarkable offer, the woman responds in the only way reasonable: "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty." (4:15).

Give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty, she asks. Give me the water that will satisfy the deep thirst within me – that thirst beyond the needs of my body. Give me the water that will save me from myself and the judgments of others. Give me this everlasting water so that my spirit is filled and my heart is made whole. Give me the living water that will make me one with God.

Now, there is much I could say about this unnamed Samaritan woman. Like how she had been not only an outcast to the Jews but also to her fellow Samaritans – widowed, divorced, most likely because she was barren, she was left to fetch water on her own because no one would want her bad luck to rub off on them. How she defied convention, threw caution to the wind, to encounter that living water for which her soul thirsts. How she then ran to the town to proclaim her encounter with the Lord to all who could hear, bidding them to come and see for themselves. How her actions foreshadow those to come of Mary Magdalene, who, on that early and fateful morning, will hurry away from the empty tomb to report to the disciples that she had encountered the risen Lord.

These are the acts of one who no longer concerns herself with the culture's rules and barriers, for she has now met the one in whom springs the living waters of eternal life. And it is to this woman that Jesus says, I see you and I love you. It doesn't matter on which mountain you worship because God is standing right in front of you. It doesn't matter the misfortunes and missteps of your life because I am here and I offer you my good gift.

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Like the Samaritan woman, we too are desperate for the living waters. Her plea is also ours: "Give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty." We may not have always known that this is what we seek, but, deep down, we have always sensed the discomfort of our thirsty soul. This is the petition of even our wordless prayers.

I believe that this story may well be at the center of the Gospel message – of the Good News of God in Christ. Jesus meets us all at the various wells of our ordinary lives. There, we are offered the living water for which our spirit desires, which then may become within us a spring of eternal life. And it is there that we will find our life – the abundant life promised and sought, and never fully found elsewhere.

Jesus offers the waters of eternal life to all whom he encounters. Jew or Gentile, male or female, sinner or saint, none of this matters to Jesus. The Samaritan woman sought to find that one place upon which all that truly matters is balanced, the place that marked the very center and heart of all that is real, true, and holy. And to her surprise, she found that very place within the man right before her.

Amen.