

“In Spirit and Truth”
John 4:5-34; 39-42; Exodus 17:1-7
Lent 3

Exodus 17:1-7

¹From 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. ²The 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?” ³But 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?” ⁴So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

⁵The 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. ⁶I 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. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

John 4:5-42

⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A 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.)

⁹The 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.)

¹⁰Jesus 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.” ¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”

¹³Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but 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.”

¹⁵The 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.”

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But 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. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”

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

²⁷Just 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?”

²⁸Then 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?” ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³²But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”

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

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s

testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”

⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word.

⁴²They 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.”

The Sermon

What did that water jar look like—the one she brought every day; the one she had on this particular day, when for some reason she came to draw water in the blistering midday sun; the one that she ended up leaving behind to run into the city and become one of the first preachers of Jesus of Nazareth?

You have to have water, so the water jar was an inescapable taskmaster, always demanding service, always requiring toil, never allowing a day off or giving so much as a pat on the back.

But being the container by which she brought life into her home—water to drink, water to bathe in, to sustain crops and animals, to clean things—it was the vessel of life, the reward of its own burden.

What do you suppose it looked like—in the corner where it was kept in the house; on her head when she carried it; in her hands as she worked the well; or as it sat there, abandoned in the place she had been talking with Jesus?

I have been haunted for decades by a testimony that I heard from someone who had returned from a mission experience in the 1980’s; I don’t remember any details, including the location, although it may have been in a Central American country among an indigenous population.

The Western volunteers, all adults, were going to help the indigenous people bring sand or earth or stones or something from a hilltop down into the area where the people lived. Each local household had their own bucket, and the leaders of the indigenous people said, “It’s important to our families that they all carry their own containers. Each family has its own bucket, and the family’s bucket is extremely precious to that family.”

The Westerners, though, knew that you could work much more efficiently by forming a human chain and passing all the buckets up and down the line.

I'd like to think they simply didn't notice the apprehensive looks on the faces of their hosts, but politeness if nothing else led the local folks finally to give in. Then began the process, wherein, sure enough, there was an efficient operation underway.

But it was galling, just destroying the souls of the local people, watching their precious household buckets being passed along the assembly line.

As daylight began to fade, predictably, the buckets started to become chipped or damaged. Inevitably, by the time the operation had ended, somebody's bucket was broken.

That story, or one of the hundreds like it, may have been repeated in Robert Lupton's book *Toxic Charity* a few years ago.¹ If not, it might as well have been. It's the same story over and over:

good intentions by self-confident outsiders for the efficient provision of human necessities,

coupled with a lack of adequate regard or respect for the indigenous people who inhabit a vastly different cultural world—and for the things that are most important to them—

and somebody's bucket gets broken.

To those for whom that doesn't seem like a big deal, it's just a bucket.

To those for whom that bucket means everything, it was life and identity and love and hope, everything there was to hang onto. It was essential in ways deeper than we might understand. It was crucial. It was needed.

Sometimes, there are nonhuman things in our lives—pets, objects, houses, places, wedding rings, mementos, inheritances—in which are wrapped up so much of our identity, our family, all that matters to us in the world; in which we have so much invested.

And sometimes we have things that are just necessary—necessary to live.

And it can be tough for us sometimes to make the distinction.

What's your water jar?

Is it your job, that carries the money you need to survive or provide for your family? Is it the abilities, the training, the education you have, that make it possible for you to do your job?

Is it your accumulated wisdom, that equips you to navigate the storms of this stage of your life—caring for others, finding your place in the world, finding meaning in the daily, weekly and monthly rhythm of your life?

Is it your physical stamina or strength or mobility, in which you carry your ability to circulate in the world, interacting with others and stimulating your mind?

What is your “water jar”? What do you use your water jar for—what do you *need* it for?

And, if you will humor me for a moment, imagine that it's a literal water jar. What does it look like? And how do you carry it?

Is it a plastic bucket with a wonky metal handle and a worn-out plastic grip? Is it hand-thrown clay with a beautiful pattern on it? Is it a silver chalice? Is it your cupped hands that can barely do better than a sieve? What does your water jar look like?

And what's in your water jar right now?

Maybe it's filled with the water or whatever you need to carry on with your earthly, vulnerable, human life—like the water for a Samaritan woman's household in ancient Palestine.

Maybe it's empty, and you're on your way back to the well. Maybe that's even what brought you here this morning.

Or maybe there are things in it that you don't need, that take up space where something else should be. Maybe there are things in it that would make toxic the water that you would like to put in there.

Whatever it may be, I offer for your consideration a prayer by Macrina Wiederkehr. I invite you to pray it with me, or simply let it wash over you.

Jesus, I come to the warmth of your Presence
knowing that You are
the very emptiness of God.
I come before You
holding the water jar of my life.
Your eyes meet mine
and I know what I'd rather not know.

I came to be filled
but I am already full.
I am too full.
This is my sickness
I am full of things
that crowd out
Your healing Presence.

A holy knowing steals inside my heart
and I see the painful truth.
I don't need more
I need less
I am too full.

I am full of things that block out
Your golden grace.
I am smothered by gods of my own creation
I am lost in the forest of my false self
I am full of my own opinions and narrow attitudes
full of fear, resentment, control
full of self pity, and arrogance.
Slowly this terrible truth pierces my heart,
I am so full, there is no room for You.

Contemplatively, and with compassion,
You ask me to reach into my water jar.
One by one, Jesus, you enable me
to lift out the things
that are a hindrance to my wholeness.

I take each on to my heart,
I hear You asking me
“Why is this so important to you?”

Like the murmur of a gentle stream
I hear You calling,
“Let go, let go, let go!”
I pray with each obstacle
tasting the bitterness and grief
it has caused.

Finally
I sit with my empty water jar
I hear you whisper
You have become a space for God
Now there is hope
Now you are ready to be a channel of Life.
You have given up your own agenda
There is nothing left but God.ⁱⁱ

In the ancient Palestinian desert, a wandering and bewildered people—they’re literally “in the wilderness” in every sense—the bewildered people of God became impatient, and footsore, and thirsty, and quarrelsome, and homesick, even though home hadn’t exactly been a cakewalk.

And having been liberated by God from a life of certain slavery into an uncertain future of freedom, they finally just said, “Moses, Give us water to drink.”

You got us into this; you get us out of it.

Moses said, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?”

But they were thirsty, and they said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

And Moses went to God and said, “What do I do with this people? They’re almost ready to stone me.”

And God said, “Go on ahead of the people; take some of the elders with you; take the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. *I will be standing there in front of*

you on the rock at Horeb. Strike it, and water will come out, and the people may drink.”

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel, and he called the place *Massah*, which means “trial” or “temptation,” and *Meribah*, which means “strife” or “contention,” because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Which is the real question, isn't it?

If you are going to promise me Living Water; if I'm supposed to feel like I don't even *need* my old water jar anymore; if you are going to get me to walk away from everything that I thought—that I was led to believe—was essential for human life, for my life;

then I need to know, God: Are you really among us, or not?

In the second chapter of the John's gospel was the story of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus transforms everyday water into miraculous wine. In John's sixth chapter, we'll have the story where Jesus multiplies two fishes and five loaves of common bread into enough miraculous food to feed all 5,000 families who were present.

The woman at the well comes exactly half way between those stories of miracles Jesus wrought with water and food. This one starts off about water, and ends up about food.

The water he wants to share is an endless stream that gushes up for us to swim in the fountain of life and love and hope and joy and strength and comfort;

and the food he serves, and invites and expects us to eat with him, is the food of sharing this abundant life with everyone else: “My food is to do the will of the One who sent me, and to complete his work.”

That's the only way the body of Christ itself can be nourished—whatever it has been; whatever it may look like in the future, the only way the body of Christ itself can be nourished is to share its access to the gushing stream of living water with others.

Kenda Creasy Dean wrote in 2010, “The truth is that two thousand years of Living

Water sloshing over the church's walls has done more to erode than defend them, leaving chinks and gaping holes that let wind and strangers in and that allow the Christian community to go out. The more churches lose our ability to barricade ourselves off from one another, the more God's grace flows through us into the world."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Living Water, sloshing over the church's walls..."

The Samaritan woman's first taste of Living Water was that the Son of God—the real presence of God in the world, among human beings—

overcame all the prevailing cultural conditions
regarding whether or not she was from the "right" racial,
religious, or cultural category of people;
overthrew the prevailing prohibitions
and cultural improprieties about gender;
overruled societal concerns about people's reputations.

The only thing Jesus seemed to need to know was that she was a person. Which was all he needed to know in order to *treat* her as a person.

This is an early taste of Living Water. Something is going on here: something that our mundane world of going to the well to draw daily water only begins to suggest,

something deep and infinite and powerful, something which is only available through an introspective and profoundly meaningful relationship with our Creator.

It is the reality of God, the reality that our limited, mortal, labor-intensive human lives are not the entirety of the story. And it is the reality that the world of our prejudices, our fears about others, our habitual distrust of people not quite like us—that world that we choose to live in—does not give us an accurate or adequate picture of what we are really part of in God's kingdom.

Daniel Migliore wrote, "As a Christian, one is called to be a partner in God's mission in the world. Christian life involves inward growth and renewal, but it does not turn in on itself. It participates in a movement outward to others and forward to the future of the completion of God's redemptive activity. The Christian [calling] is...the call to invite all into a new community where justice is done and where freedom and love flourish, a community that is grounded in

Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and destined for participation in the eternal communion of the triune God.”^{iv}

As we think about the daily water that we carry, and the things we use as water jars to carry it in,

we can also think about who this man is, and who is the God he embodies,

and who is the Spirit that allows me to keep returning to him when I begin to wonder whether my God is among us or not, and saying,

“Sir, give me this Living Water, so that I may not have to keep drawing water from wells that always leave me thirsty again.”

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ⁱ Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charity* (HarperOne, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Macrina Wiederkehr, “The Prayer of the Empty Water Jar,” in Wiederkehr, *Seasons of Your Heart* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 32-33.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65.

^{iv} Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 183.