

Water, Rocks, and Wells

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

John 4:5-42

Highland Park Presbyterian Church

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This week our lectionary texts talk to us about water. Can you believe it? At a time when we are all washing our hands and singing familiar songs to be sure we clean them for at least twenty seconds. Many of us have become tired of singing Happy Birthday through twice, so we have chosen other songs, like the Doxology. It's not like we haven't been washing hands all our lives. It's just that we're taking it much more seriously now. We want to protect ourselves and each other from the dangerous corona virus. And it's an important step. But I suspect that one result for most of us these days, is that the first thing we think about when we hear the word water, is washing.

Water. We can't live without it. In fact, our bodies are more water than anything else. The brain and heart are composed of 73% water, and the lungs are about 83% water. The skin contains 64% water, muscles and kidneys are 79%. Even our bones are watery: 31%. We can go weeks or even months without adequate food, but three days is the maximum we can survive without water. Water and life are synonymous.

Water is such a rich image and it has so many meanings for us as Christians. No wonder that both our biblical texts this morning are about water. But like so many familiar texts, each time I read them I find something new that puzzles me. That's probably because we always read a story in the context of current events. Most of the time we read this story as a condemnation of the Israelites' lack of faith in God. Even the writer of Psalm 95 complains of their hardened hearts. They complained about not having water instead of believing that God would provide. And they questioned whether God was with them or not. They even *demand*ed that Moses give them water. So the story blames them for their lack of trust. Moses even names the places after their "testing" and their "quarreling". Apparently he wanted posterity to remember their stubbornness forever. And we do.

But this time the story seemed different to me. These Israelites, recently freed from slavery in Egypt, were wandering around in the desert and found themselves without water. Why does this passage blame the people? The people's thirst has always seemed like a legitimate concern to me. If I had gone without water that long, and there was no water in sight, I'd be more than a little anxious. I'd probably even worry about my survival and the survival of my family. I'd be looking for help wherever I could find it. I might complain. I might even argue with the leader of our group about having enough to drink.

What's even more puzzling to me is Moses' reaction. He doesn't seem troubled that the people are thirsty or afraid. In fact, he doesn't mention their plight at all. Instead he sees their demand for water as a criticism of his leadership. He even fears that they want to kill him. I wonder about his reaction. Why are you making this about you, Moses? This is about your people's needs – their really basic, life-sustaining needs. In one important sense, this story may say something about leadership. Responding to the critical needs of the moment: thirst, or hunger, or financial disaster, or an impending pandemic – means acknowledging the crisis and responding rather than personalizing the complaints.

Moses sure takes their complaint personally. Anyone who has ever led a group of people will recognize the sting of criticism and the temptation to experience it as an attack. But even when the criticism is personal – and sometimes it is – it still helps to recognize the pain or fear that is driving that complaint. I wondered this week what would have happened if Moses had said, "I understand your thirst and your worry. I'm thirsty, too. We are in a truly frightening situation, and it is hard to have hope. But remember that it is God that has led us here. And God has promised to deliver us." Ah, that's why I read this text differently this week. We, too, are in a desert of sorts, called out from the familiar into unknown territory. We don't know what's coming next. We're learning as much as we can, doing the best we can, and even our best scientists are still figuring it all out. We're afraid – afraid of an unseen and potentially fatal enemy. We don't know how to plan, what will be asked of us next. No wonder the Israelites' fear makes sense today in a way it didn't before.

But sometimes water is about something other than survival. A friend of mine tells a story many of us will recognize. He'd been trying to get his two sons to go to bed peacefully one evening - with the results many of us have faced. Johnny, the younger of the two boys, had even more questions and requests than usual. First, he didn't like the pajamas he had on, so Dad helped him change them. Then he needed a drink of water. Then he had to go to the bathroom - twice. Then he had some questions to ask his father about school the next day. His father was on to him, but didn't know what to do. Finally Johnny asked for another drink of water. Dad said No, he'd already had one, and it was time for sleep. After two more drink requests mournfully floated down the steps to Dad, Dad finally became frustrated. "If I have to come up there once more, Johnny, I'll have to spank you." There was a long pause, and Dad thought the issue must surely be settled at long last. As he settled back to his work, he could just barely make out the words that came to him this time. "Dad, Dad, when you come up to spank me, could you bring me a drink of water?"

It isn't hard to imagine what lay behind Johnny's request for just one more glass of water. It may have been comfort, or a companion while he drifted off to sleep. It may have been simply a few more moments of time with his Dad before day's end. That certainly describes Moses' followers in the desert. Their need for water was real, but there was more to it. Faced with the prospect of no water they cried out, "Is the Lord among us or not?" We don't want to be alone; we may feel abandoned and fear the unknown. The familiar world we live in is disrupted, and there are no guarantees about what's coming next. Yes, a little like what we are experiencing in these days of pandemic.

But the Gospel text speaks of water in a different way. It is the longest story in the book of John other than the narratives of Jesus' death and Resurrection. So it is an important story, and is rich with possibilities (and at least a dozen sermons). The setting is a familiar one: Jesus is traveling through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem and he, too, becomes thirsty. During a visit to the village well he encounters the Samaritan woman. The story reminds us of the wide chasm between Jews and Samaritans – both an ethnic and a religious difference. The parable of the Good Samaritan embodies, too, the cultural divide between these two peoples. So Jesus' stopping to speak to her broke a very strong taboo. But it was also unheard of for a man to speak to a woman and to make such a request of her. In one move, Jesus crossed two critical barriers, reached across two, or even three, divides: religion, culture, and gender.

It is a natural human tendency to distrust those who are unlike ourselves. In our deep past we humans depended on our own tribes and protected ourselves fiercely from outside groups; our lives depended on it. So we still find it too easy at times to distrust and avoid, or even attack, those who are different from us. And fear makes that response even more likely. In recent days we've heard about suspicion and even rejection of persons of Asian descent; the origin of the corona virus in China has caused irrational fears of those who remind us of our fear of a pandemic. In crisis, we are reminded of our own weaknesses, our own vulnerabilities.

But today there is an even more important lesson. Jews and Samaritans had long been separated by competing claims about where to worship God. For the Jews, it was Jerusalem. For the Samaritans, it was "this mountain." Place matters. Where we worship God matters. And often simply walking into a familiar worship space like ours connects us with memories, with human connections, and with God. And when we lose those spaces, or are forced to abandon them even temporarily, we grieve.

Ah, so that's why this text speaks differently to me today than it has in the past. For this week our Session has faced the challenge of determining where we will worship. Public health officials and city and state leaders have been increasingly warning that the only way to slow the spread of the current pandemic is social distancing.

"Social distancing?" That's the exact opposite of what we are as Christians! We are about caring for each other, about being together, about shaking hands and standing beside each other, about the laying on of hands when we ordain others to Christian leadership. Social distancing? That goes against every grain of my being! We want to be together. We want to join our voices in song and hear the Scriptures read and preached. We want to hear great music and pray together. This is a place we uniquely experience God. Jesus even said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Jesus' answer holds a critically important word for us today. "God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth." God is not contained in one location, no matter how sacred that space may be. The God we worship transcends the walls at 330 Laurel Avenue and holds us even when we are unable to be together in our familiar settings, with our

familiar members and our familiar patterns. We pray we can return to those places and practices soon. But in the meantime, we are challenged to explore the depth of our faith in God, to find new ways to remind us that God is, indeed, still among us.

Session, deacons and staff will be working hard over the coming days to find safe ways for us to connect, even to worship. This season will undoubtedly prompt us to explore the wonders of technology in ways we have yet to experience. We will make every effort we can to nurture our fellowship and our spiritual formation. But ultimately, what we depend on, is the faithfulness of our God who promises to hold us, care for us, and never leave us. In spirit and in truth, indeed. We worship a God who is much bigger than a viral threat, or financial volatility, or temporary suspensions of our regular ways of worship. It will be a test of our faith, to be sure. Like the Israelites, we may question whether God is still among us. Like the Samaritan woman we may wonder where the living water comes from.

And that, my friends, is the hope we all live in together. Jesus declares to her that God reaches out to those who worship in spirit, in truth. That same promise is spoken to us today. Amen.