

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

March 19, 2017; the 3rd Sunday in Lent

Readings: *Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42.*

Thirsting for the Gift of God

The Israelites have escaped slavery in Egypt, but freedom in the wilderness comes with its challenges.

There are material challenges, like finding enough food and water, and then there are the spiritual challenges, such as trusting God in that wilderness time.

The people turned to their leader Moses, and demand water; 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?”

Real world stuff, that causes the people to ask, “Is the Lord among us, or not?”

Early in their journey, this testing of God is not presented as negative...but valid, and God responds, “yes, I am” by giving them the water they need.

The Israelites knew they were in a wilderness, a desert, and they knew that they needed God.

Knowing the reality of our situation and what we need is not something humanity is always skilled in discerning.

But it is in the reality of our situation...it is here that God meets us...is waiting for us.

We are surrounded by so much that competes for our

attention---the demands of our culture to be all that we ought to be---media/technology that is a gift in many ways, but also distracting from what is right in front of us.

The Samaritan woman at the well, may well have been distracted by the many voices in her life that judged her---voices that told her who she was and who she would always be.

The text, the scripture, provides no evidence that she was morally lacking -- only that she has a number of husbands, which could have been the case for different reasons...she could have been a widow many times over.

But throughout the centuries, commentators often assumed that she was a notorious sinner.

The people of her own time might have had similar concerns about her.

What was she thinking as she went to draw water that day?

For what was she longing?

Did she know how thirsty she was before meeting Jesus?

She was certainly not prepared for her encounter with Jesus...for the grace she would receive.

The Lenten program we are holding on Wednesday nights, features a young woman, Joan, a teenager, who regularly talks to God.

God comes right up to her during the day in the form of men, women, children...and talks with her, much like Jesus did with the woman at the well.

It is amazing how much the episode we watched this past Wednesday, entitled, "State of Grace," connects with

the story of the woman at the well.

In the episode, God, appearing as “security guard” God, asks Joan if she knows the meaning of grace, and then defines it in this way:

“It’s a touch of truth that let’s you see the world in a new way.

It’s a gift that can only be felt when you’re open enough to accept it.”

Let’s hear that again: “It’s a touch of truth that let’s you see the world in a new way.

It’s a gift that can only be felt when you’re open enough to accept it.”

In the *Joan of Arcadia* episode, the theme centered on people being able to find their voice.

There is much grace in being able to find one’s voice...sometimes we have trouble finding our true voice because we think the world will not be open to it or the situation would not be right to speak our truth or no one wants to hear what we have to say.

In the show, a gay teenage boy breaks through the oppressive prigous of his own father to come out.

Another boy on the debate team, who stutters severely, sees the world in a new way when Joan encourages

him to write for the school newspaper as way to make his voice heard.

After hearing Joan find her voice in a school debate,

Joan’s mother, Helen, finds her voice by applying to be an art teacher at the High School.

The grace of receiving a touch of truth that lets one see the world in a new way, happened for all those people.

This happened for the woman at the well.

We don't have a name for the woman at the well.

Her story follows that of Nicodemus, whose name we do know.

They are foils for each other in that the woman at the well is open to grace in a way that Nicodemus was not yet ready to receive.

Imagine the scene: there she is going to get water from the well as she has every day for years...there she is with

all of her history and the circumstances of her life in that moment, that day.

Jesus is sitting at the well.

Give me a drink, he says to her.

Already, what she knows about the world and her place in it is being challenged.

And so she asks Jesus, why are you asking me for a drink?

Jews and Samaritans were not friendly and it was also going against all normal social conventions for Jesus, a man, to talk to a woman he does not know.

Jesus challenges her to see the world in a new way, to receive a touch of truth, that will be grace for her---

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

How can you get living water...you have no bucket?

She says...a bit like Nicodemus at first, taking Jesus literally.

But he goes on:

“Everyone who drinks of this water 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.”

Then she asks for this water...she doesn't want to live as
she has, continually seeking water that does not
satisfy.

Jesus then lets her know that he knows the pain of her
life...all that she has been through.

Jesus is showing her that the grace he brings is for her in
the reality of her life.

She then starts to really understand who he is....after
the words from Jesus about worship not being about
a place but about worshiping in spirit and
truth.

Jesus' words about worshipping in spirit and truth help
put her in mind of the coming of God, and then...he
reveals himself to her...that he is the Messiah.

Then the disciples show up, totally confused ...why is
Jesus talking to this woman.

But that woman found her voice through her encounter
with Jesus, through the grace given, a touch of truth
that let her see the world in a new way...see herself in a new
way...she received that gift because she was open enough to accept
it.

And off she went, to tell others about Jesus...her voice so strong that many believed and remembered

her witness that we know of her today even though
we don't know her name.

Timothy Gallagher, in his book *An Ignatian Introduction to Prayer*, suggest that Jesus wants to meet us at the well too.

In Ignatian prayer, we put ourselves in the scene:

"I am there by the well...I see the dry countryside surrounding the well, the earthen road...I feel the heat of the midday hours...I see Jesus seated by the well, alone, his weariness revealed in his face as he rests...I become aware that he is waiting for me, that he has a 'gift of God'" that he longs to give me today"

The meditation continues...coming to ... "I ask Jesus to help me know the gift that he is offering me even now, as I pray. I ask for eyes that are spiritually open to see this gift...and to embrace it in my life."¹

What is the touch of truth that will help you see the world
in a new way?

What is that grace God desires for you to embrace today?

May we be open enough to accept the grace that will
strengthen us, comfort us, give us courage, help us
find our voice, and set us free. Amen.

¹ Timothy Gallagher, *An Ignatian Introduction to Prayer, Spiritual Reflections According to the Spiritual Exercises*, New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2007.