

Sermon: Living Water

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

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Based on **Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:1-42**

Thirsting and testing: that's the gist of where we are today.

Our reading from Exodus very elaborately gets to the people's central concern which they have held throughout their sojourn in the wilderness, and that is, How can we know if God is in our midst? That may be our concern too.

The Israelites' behavior followed a pattern: when they had what they needed and wanted, they believed God was with them and everything was great. In times of thirst or hunger or affliction, however, they felt abandoned and betrayed and alone.

For example, when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple, the people asked – cried out, really – “Where is God now?”

In the Gospel reading, a thirsty Jesus asks for a drink at noon. Then he offers ‘living water’ to a Samaritan woman. In their conversation, the matter of God's dwelling place comes up. She wants to know: Is God found only in Jerusalem or is God also in Samaria? Jesus replied that God is in neither place exclusively but is here at the well and also on the road between Jerusalem and Samaria; God is wherever here is, right now.

God is everywhere a thirst for living water exists. That point is driven home for the Samaritan woman once she realizes to whom she is speaking.

Perhaps it's a coincidence or perhaps not, but this story comes along soon after last week's story about Nicodemus, and it may be that proximity that invites us to compare the Samaritan woman with Nicodemus, at least superficially.

Last week, Nicodemus came to Jesus by night; today, Jesus came to the well in broad daylight. He and the Samaritan woman get into the discussion which we just heard, and at the end, in her last words in the story, the woman asked her neighbors, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Compare that to Nicodemus' last words when he asked, “How can these things be?” (John 3:9) One of them seems to be on the right track.

We like to tell our children that God is everywhere, but how do we know? Do we assume, as did the ancient Israelites, that when things are going well, well, then, that's proof that God is with us? And when things are going bad, is that a sign that God is looking the other way?

Here in our town, we're getting to the end of what turned out to be a pretty mild winter. We feel blessed that we didn't have to shovel any snow at all. But to the north and west of Boston, it's a different story. In this trivial example, in terms of snowfall totals, is the LORD only among us and not with the rest of New England?

Scripturally speaking, maybe we just have to be thirsty in the wilderness to find out if God is with us or not. But why would our location matter to God?

Then you might say, no, it's when we're thirsty *spiritually* that God is with us. That's when Jesus showed up at the well for the Samaritan woman, after all, but that could also have just been good timing. He may not have known what she was looking for until they got to talking. And without knowing it, she was thirsty, *spiritually* speaking.

How about this. What if God is always with us and we're so preoccupied we just don't notice? What if we only sense God's presence when things are bad? When we need God the most, maybe that's when we're aware of God standing before us saying, "Here's some living water; drink."

Last week, Jesus said, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that *the world* might be saved through him" (3:17).

Today, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "[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" (4:23). To me, 'true worshipers' includes the woman and the people of the village, even though they be Samaritans. And now many, but not all, from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony.

And those who came to believe in him told *her* that they knew Jesus was the Savior *of the world*, closing the loop on last week's reading.

So, God *seeks* those who worship in spirit and in truth. Notice that God seeks even Samaritans, who were as far outside the tent as a first-century Israelite could get.

In the 1950s, Mother Teresa began her ministry of caring for the unwanted, the unloved, the desolate poor in Calcutta. She took into herself their misery and their sense of abandonment, and her work affected her.

In her diary, she spoke of how her interior life was ‘marked by an experience of a deep, painful and abiding feeling of being separated from God,’ even feeling rejected by God, but she also felt an ever-increasing longing for God’s love.¹

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus was thirsty at the well, and at the end of the Gospel, Jesus on the Cross will cry out, “I am thirsty” (19:28). And Mother Teresa felt in her body and soul ‘the love of an infinite *thirsty* God.’²

If Jesus is willing to speak with a Samaritan – a woman, no less – at Jacob’s Well, and if he is willing to search for and find just *one* lost sheep, then Jesus is willing to speak to us and seek us out too, even as we are looking for him. Jesus is thirsting to find us. We just have to want to be found and be thirsty enough to ask him for a drink.

We all need the well and the water in it, a bucket to draw it up, and Jesus sitting beside us, telling us about ourselves.

So, we may be thirsty, but so is God, thirsting to meet us at the well to give us the living water of eternal life, and we will never thirst again.

Amen.

¹ https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20031019_madre-teresa_en.html

² Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk, MC (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 154-157.