



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Third Sunday of Lent

March 19, 2017

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Scriptures

The events described in the First Reading took place after Moses and the Israelites had fled from Egypt and were traveling toward the Promised Land. The Israelites were miserable from thirst. Focused on their misery, they grumbled to Moses about God, wondering if the same God who had delivered them from slavery was now going to let them die. Instead of just asking God for help, Moses and the Israelites complained. God did not hold their lack of faith against them. When Moses followed God's instructions, he found water, in abundance, in the most impossible of places: a rock. Once again, God demonstrated to his faithless people that he had the power to save them, and was always willing to do so. This would not be the last time the Israelites challenged God, but they never forgot what happened at Massah and Meribah, where they had disregarded God's kindness and questioned his motives. They had hardened their hearts (see today's Responsorial Psalm) but found God to be ever-faithful, concerned for their welfare, and always willing to provide what they needed.

We meet this same God, in Jesus, in today's Gospel. A weary Jesus was traveling through Samaria. He sat at a well to rest while his disciples went for supplies. A woman approached the well at noon to draw water--an outcast perhaps, coming in the heat of noon. She was a Samaritan, despised and avoided by Jews. Jesus violated many norms of his time to engage her. He asked for a drink; she was sarcastic in response. Jesus got her attention with talk of living water. She did not understand. He invited her to drink of a living water only he could give, a source of eternal life. She still did not understand. When Jesus mentioned her marital status, she took him for a prophet. She admitted many marriages but changed the subject by speaking about the differences between Jews and Samaritans. When she mentioned the Messiah, Jesus told her directly that she was speaking to him! The disciples returned and were puzzled to find Jesus talking to a woman alone, but the woman slipped away to tell the townspeople about her encounter with Jesus whom she believed was the Christ. They returned to meet Jesus and came to believe that he was the Savior.

These readings show the depth of God's love for humanity. In Romans, St. Paul tells us that God proved his love by sending his son Jesus to die for those who had not yet repented, but were still sinners. The same God who had chosen, saved, and protected the faithless, grumbling Israelites, also sent Jesus to seek out St. Paul, the Samaritan woman, and all who are miserable, despised, and desperately thirsty, and invite them to experience his peace. Those who accept his gift of faith are made right with God, who responds by sending the living water of his Holy Spirit to pour his love into their hearts.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: Exodus 17:3-7

Is the Lord in our midst or not?

- In the Exodus reading, the Israelites grumble about their experience in the desert.
- Their thirst represents Israel's real question, "Why did God make us leave Egypt?"
- Yahweh responds graciously to the needs of the people.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 95: 1-2, 6-7. 8-9.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Reading II: Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

We are at peace with God through Christ.

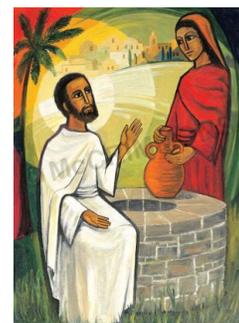
- The wonder of God's free gift of salvation in Jesus is subject of the passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans.
- God responds to our need with compassion and mercy.
- God's love is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Gospel: John 4:5-42

Whoever drinks the water I give, will never thirst again.

- In the story of the Samaritan woman, Jesus uses water as a symbol of God's revelation and God's Spirit.
- The exchange between Jesus and the woman causes conversion to take place.
- The woman identifies Jesus several times, each time with greater understanding. First, he was a Jewish man, then a prophet, and finally she makes a comment about the Messiah.

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A Samaritan Apostle

Nobody would be surprised to hear that the account of the Samaritan woman at the well is called a conversion story. Some will compare her to the woman caught in adultery or other famous women in Scripture. In reality there are many similarities among them all, but they don't necessarily lead to traditional themes of repentance and penance.

If we start by looking at the Samaritan woman as an apostle in her hometown, we might ask about the message she took to her people. After all, she had engaged in quite a theological discussion with Jesus, going from questions about whether he had something better than Jacob's well (tradition) to where people should really worship (liturgy) and ending with hearing Jesus identify himself as the Christ (theology). So, what was her message? "He told me everything I have done." That is all that we hear from her. In discussion with Jesus she had said that the coming Messiah would "tell us everything," but there was no hint that "everything" would be primarily personal information.

What we have in this story is a rather complex encounter in which Jesus first approaches this woman on the level of human need. He asks her for water. But oh, how the simplest things can be complicated! The Samaritans now owned Jacob's well, a symbol of the common roots and tradition they shared with the Jews. But how could a Jew ask a Samaritan for anything? The Jews had destroyed the Samaritans' temple on Mount Gerizim, they disdained the Samaritans for being backwoods idolaters whose intermarriage with non-chosen people had contaminated the bloodlines. In short, they were antagonistic peoples inextricably related to one another at the deepest level of their religious history. Jesus was taking on all of that with his simple request for a drink.

As the exchange progressed there was great theological discussion about living water, Jacob's importance, correct worship, prophets and the coming Messiah. But what really counted was that Jesus revealed himself to the woman and revealed her to herself. We don't know the extent of their dialogue, we only know that she came to believe he had come from God and proclaimed, "He told me everything I have done."

What's interesting about this in the context of Lent is that we have a conversion story that doesn't focus at all on sinfulness or even traditional repentance but rather on being known and accepted. When the conversations about husbands began,

the woman said she had none, and Jesus replied that she had known at least five. But there is no follow-up on the topic. No talk about straightening out her life, no discussion about laws concerning divorce and remarriage, nor about whether she could commune with him in her current state.

She told her people, "He told me everything I have done." One gets the sense that Jesus explained her to herself. The symbolism of five husbands speaks to a person seeking something on a human level. Her discussion about where to worship, about prophets and the coming Messiah showed that she was well versed in the tradition and had real theological questions and religious hopes. But the message she took home spoke of none of that. She had been accepted for everything she was, just as she was. That fulfilled a need that no affair of the flesh or the mind could ever satisfy.

This story is about thirst, about God seeking and finding beloved humanity. Whatever her social status, whether she was the town reject or a popular figure, the Samaritan became an apostle, an evangelizer. In *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), Pope Francis writes, "Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that she or he has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus." That is exactly what happened to the Samaritan woman. Theology, liturgical correctness and the question of who has the better tradition are no more than distractions in the face of an encounter with Christ. Her interaction with Jesus filled her with the living water (the Spirit) that made her an apostle, one who enticed others into a similar encounter.

The church offers us this story in this third week of Lent and invites us to meditate on the woman and her transformation. It reminds us that our faith is based on a personal encounter with Christ, the one whose effect on us is like cascading water. Water filling us and bubbling over into joyful expressions of being so loved just as we are, that we are impelled to continue the relationship and share it. The conversion revealed here is about focusing on Jesus and God's love, nothing more and nothing less.

After all is said and done, the reading does leave us with a blaringly unanswered question: Did she ever give Jesus that drink of water?
~Mary McGlone