

## Refreshing Water of Life

(A sermon by the Rev. David A. Ames, All Saints' Memorial Church,  
Providence, RI, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2017)

Lessons: Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42

The biblical stories from the Book of Exodus and the Gospel of John are about reconciliation. As we heard in our first reading the Israelites in the Exodus story quarrel and wrestle with God without realizing that it is God who is testing them. John's Gospel account is about Jesus' relationship with a Samaritan woman and what it means to include those who are religiously and culturally different. The message of these stories is that we are to be reconcilers, people who bring others together out of respect, and who work hard to understand that God is the God of all people of every nation, ethnicity and religion.

Throughout the wilderness stories there is disagreement and quarreling between the people and Moses. Moses had led the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness on their way to the promised land. As they traveled through the desert there was no water and the people became thirsty and angry. In desperation Moses cried out to God, "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord replied, "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. I 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."

The dispute between Moses and the people was serious. Moses felt his own life was in danger. The details in this story are important: the elders were taken along as witnesses. Moses' staff, which was so significant in the story of the plagues, is the chosen instrument, and God's presence is dominant: "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb." Moses will strike the rock with his staff and God will cause water to gush from it bringing life to the desert and the people.

Israel's journey from Egypt through the wilderness to Mount Sinai and the promised land was a time of danger and testing. The Israelites met with numerous obstacles as they moved from one camping place to another. There was insufficient and bitter water, and not enough food. People were fearful and complained, unprepared for the challenge of faith in the wilderness, so they longed for a return to the security of slavery in Egypt. They grumbled against Moses, "Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die of thirst with our children and livestock?" They quarreled with Moses and they tested God, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

By testing God they learned that God is the "Rock," faithful and worthy of trust. From the Rock came streams of water, enough to sustain life for their journey. While they thought they were quarreling with and testing God (Massah and Meribah mean quarreling and testing), it turns out that God was, in fact, testing them. The Lord took the initiative, cared for them, and reconciled them to God.

Although the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John was not thirsting in the desert wilderness, she was in a wrong place at a wrong time. She lived and worshipped in the

wrong place, she was the wrong gender, and she had an unconventional marriage. Jesus, however, refused to judge her.

Jesus' traveling through Samaria seemed calculated to highlight his presence among those who were considered "unworthy." At the end of the story, the despised Samaritans came out to meet Jesus because of the testimony of this woman. They invited him to stay with them and after they listened to him, they concluded that he was not limited to what either Jews or Samaritans expected in a messiah. They confessed that he was "the Savior of the world."

The story becomes intriguing in revealing how this woman emerged as the unlikely witness who brought a whole town to Jesus. Her encounter with Jesus did not begin well. They did not even use language the same way. He asked for water, but she hesitated because of her surprise at being asked. Jesus told her she should ask him for a kind of water that would quench all thirst. She continued to think about the endless task of drawing enough water for her household needs, but Jesus said, "The water that I will give will become... a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." What an astonishing statement!

There are many dimensions to this story. It is about Jesus' identity as the one who comes from God, makes God known, and is one with God. It is also about religious tensions and the struggle to overcome them. The story of the Samaritan woman has been referred to as a "paradigm of all reconciliation" in which an ancient enmity begins to heal through the conversation at the well, her testimony, and the experience of more and more Samaritans who come to hear Jesus because of her witness.

Two people, taught to loathe each other because of religious difference, create the possibility of reconciliation and shared faith through serious conversation and acceptance. It is a narrative that invites us to look deeply into our own lives to see what leaves us fearful of looking into one another's eyes, especially if those eyes belong to someone who is different. The Samaritan woman serves as a model in which real listening, questioning and sharing lead to profound understanding and faith. It is a story of reconciliation that invites us to step into an unfamiliar place of dialogue from which may come the possibility for real healing and new life. It reminds us of the reality of God's presence: the One who makes all conversation possible, the Rock from which flows life-giving water.

None of us has been an ex-slave wandering in the Sinai wilderness, hungry for food or thirsting for water. None of us has drawn water from a well in Samaria. What we learn is that God is gracious and cares for all people, and we can be agents or ambassadors for reconciliation. In the midst of our doubts, divisions, testing, and frustrations while attempting to resolve problems in our relationships, God is there to sustain and provide the water of life.

The gospel proclaims that Jesus is himself the living water that springs up, wells up within us and satisfies our insatiable human need -- our thirst for God. As the late poet Denise Levertov wrote in "The Fountain:"

Don't say, don't say there is no water.  
That fountain is there...  
it is still there and always there  
with its quiet song and strange power  
to spring in us,

up and out through the rock.

Amen.