

Sermon for Sunday, March 19, 2023
Third Sunday in Lent, Year A
Sermon Text(s): Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42
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“Someone’s thirsting, Lord, kum ba ya.”

As the Worship Committee sought to create
kum ba ya verses for each week of Lent,
the theme emerging from this week’s readings was pretty clear:
Someone’s thirsting, Lord.

The Israelites in the wilderness in our reading from Exodus,
the woman at the well in the Gospel reading from John.

Someone’s thirsting, Lord, kum ba ya. Come by here.

The thirst in these readings isn’t just about their physical bodies needing water,
although that was certainly part of it,
but also about their spiritual need for God,
the metaphor of God as “living water” for our souls.

It seems somewhat dissonant to talk about water as a gift and blessing
in the midst of this winter in which our community has experienced
the destructive powers of water
through flooding, waves and storms –
again this weekend, with more storms to come tomorrow night.

But even though we’ve seen the dark side of water lately,
its power to destroy and kill,
water is essential for all known forms of life.
It could even be said that water is the key to life, biologically speaking.

Although water does have the power to destroy us,
we are ultimately dependent on water for our very survival,
and we are dependent on God to provide us that water.

In this region that is so familiar with drought,
the concept of thirst, of scarcity of water,

is very real to us on an environmental level,
even though we've been experiencing the opposite in recent weeks.

But for today, with these scripture passages,
let's remind ourselves what it is to thirst,
to have to seek for water that seems scarce,
and the lessons that has for our spiritual lives.

In our baptismal service, we give thanks to God for water
and recount the ways in which it is part of our religious history:

“We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.
Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.
Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the
land of promise.
In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy
Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and
resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism.
In it we are buried with Christ in his death.
By it we share in his resurrection.
Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.
Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those
who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and
of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” (BCP 306-07)

This brief summary of significant events in the history of our faith
that happened in water, with water, or through water
doesn't include the two we hear about in our readings today.

The framers of our Prayer Book could have added a few more lines
to the baptismal prayer of blessing over the water:

“With it you nourished the children of Israel in the wilderness.
Through it your Son Jesus brought new life to a Samaritan woman,
breaking down religious boundaries
and leading her to proclaim him as the Messiah.”

God not only brought the children of Israel out of Egypt *through* water –
by walking through the parted waters of the Red Sea –
he sustained them during those forty years in the wilderness *with* water,
providing them water from the rock in the desert.

Despite the people's quarreling and grumbling and complaining,
questioning the purpose of the very liberation God had brought to them,
God continued to be faithful and provided them with the basics for life –
water from the rock,
and food in the form of manna from heaven and quail.

And Jesus was not just baptized in water;
he continued to use water as a powerful image in his teaching,
including when he spoke to Nicodemus
about being born “of water and the spirit” in the passage we heard last week,
and when he told the Samaritan woman in our reading today
that he had “living water” to give her,
water that would never leave her thirsty again.

She doesn't understand at first
that he's not talking about actual physical water,
some kind of magic liquid that could slake her thirst forever,
but about a spiritual sustenance that could feed her soul from within,
an internal “well” of strength, of support, of love, of comfort, of protection,
offered to her through a connection with this man standing before her,
this man who “told me everything I have ever done.”

Jesus's reference to this internal spiritual sustenance as “living water”
draws on water's vital importance to human existence:
it is key to life; without it we die.

The same is true of our relationship with God.

We must continually seek it –

like this woman coming day after day to draw water from the well –
or else we perish.

In 21st century America,
where clean water is readily available
with little to no effort or money expended on our part,
many of us have lost touch with just how important
the search for and acquisition of water is

when one does not have easy access to it.
We in the West might be more acquainted with it
than other parts of the country,
having experienced water restrictions during droughts,
but even in this part of the country,
rarely are we unable to acquire water
by simply turning on a tap
only a few steps away from where we happen to be at any given moment.

To us, an offer of “living water” that would never leave us thirsty
might be a nice but unnecessary additional convenience.

For the woman in today’s Gospel reading, though,
and for thousands of people who still walk miles to draw water
all over the world,
to have access to water that would assuage her thirst forever
would be life-changing.
It would mean she would not have to keep coming back to a well
to draw water and cart it back to her household.
She would have time and energy
to devote to things other than mere survival.

And so we can almost hear the desperation in her voice when she responds,
“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty
or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

It is with that kind of intensity, that kind of passion,
that we should seek God as well.

Our physical needs are so primary, so essential,
that we can get stuck in seeking to fulfill them alone,
but fulfilling our spiritual needs is the only way we will find true sustenance,
true life, life beyond the physical, biological meaning of the word.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow observed
that until our basic physiological needs are met,
it is nearly impossible for human beings to focus on anything else.
Only when we have enough to eat, shelter, and water,
can we begin to explore higher level needs like spiritual awakening.

This is why when “someone’s thirsting” on a real, physical level, those of us who have our basic needs met are called to do all in our power to assist others in meeting those basic needs – feeding them, giving something to drink – so that they, too, can seek the spiritual sustenance that will truly nourish them, completely, wholly, at every level of their being.

What we often don’t realize is that our hunger, our craving, for the “higher” spiritual needs, is just as essential to our survival as the physical needs.

Too many of us stop when we have our basic physiological needs met, neglecting to continue up that hierarchy of needs to pursue the rest of the things we need in order to be truly alive, truly fulfilled.

Jesus is telling the woman by the well that she has a deeper need even than the physical thirst that brings her here day after day, and that only when she addresses that need will her real thirst be quenched.

When the disciples come back and meet up with Jesus and encourage him to “eat something,” his response is, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”

Just like the woman at the well, they don’t get it either, asking one another, “Did you give him some food? I didn’t give him any food. Did *you* give him some food?” – but again, he’s talking about a deeper hunger than the physical.

The “food” he has is of the same sort as the “living water” – an internal source, connected to a higher spiritual power, that has the ability to truly nourish in a way that literal, physical food cannot do.

Jesus reminds us that we will only assuage our true hunger and thirst when we seek God as desperately as we seek to fulfill our physical needs.

“Give me this water,” we should cry out,
like the woman at the well,
give me the living water of God that will quench my soul.

The next time you find yourself parched
and longing for a cool, refreshing drink of water,
take a moment to try to direct that longing toward the very presence of God.

Try to notice when you are spiritually thirsty,
and seek out those things that refresh your soul
with as much urgency as you reach for a cool drink of water
on a hot, dry day.

We are thirsting, Lord.
Come by here.
Amen.