

Third Sunday In Lent – Christina Smerick

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

Water... Have you ever been so thirsty your mouth was completely dry? Your head was pounding, and your blood felt like it had congealed to pudding in your veins? Me neither. We take water for granted in this developed land, except for those who don't have clean water (Flint, West Virginia ... possibly everyone, now that the streams' protection has been removed). We take water so much for granted that some of us can't quite figure out why the Sioux Nation has camped out in frozen tundra and put their bodies on the line for it. We take water so much for granted that we don't find it weird that we pay for it in plastic bottles from the grocery store: that despite its abundance, someone has figured out how to profit from it. But we need to use our imaginations today to try to feel that dryness, that parched sensation, that deadening panic that can arise when one simply does not have water.

We can live without food for a while. Without water, we can last, on average, three days. So maybe we can sympathize a bit with the Israelites, who are parched, headachy, and panicking. They're watching their children wither before their eyes, the sun is beating down, they're homeless, wandering in a desert, and there is no water. It is telling that God doesn't yell at them, or tell them to suck it up, or despair for their lack of faith, but rather provides what they need—with witnesses to the miracle, lest anyone doubt who supplied it. For the Israelites are not just dying of physical thirst—they're losing **hope**. Without water, the people of Israel will die. But without hope, the people of Israel are already dead. So God does not address one kind of thirst and ignore the other: God doesn't have Moses lecture the Israelites about trust and faith and hope. God gives them what they need—**WATER**—and **in so doing gives them hope**.

All too often, I think we tend to separate the physical from the spiritual. We read Paul's letter on suffering and interpret it as 'suck it up and have faith'. But what we see in Exodus is not a God who tells us that our physical needs don't matter, or that we're stupid or trivial to focus on them. We see a God who understands that his creatures are **bodies**—that our faith and our hope happen, and are all about, our bodies in the world. Our pain and suffering, even when it is spiritual or emotional suffering, is felt in our bodies: our teeth clench, our stomach hurts, our heart races. By meeting the physical needs of the Israelites, God meets their spiritual needs. It's a package deal.

And we see a beautiful reversal of this situation in the very long passage from John, one of my favorites. Oh my, there is so much to talk about here! Most of you who have been attending St. Paul's have heard this before, but it's worth repeating, just how subversive, how upside down this story is. Holy wow. So before I reach my grand finale, let's take some time to pay attention to all the twisty ways Jesus messes with the status quo.

Point the first: Jesus is in Samaria. I'm not going to nerd out on you, but he is NOT AT HOME. Samaria is home to people who intermarried with non-Jewish people after the Assyrian invasion and take over waaay back in 722 BCE. To Jewish eyes, these folks are

worse than Gentiles. Gentiles are just pagans from other places. The Samaritans have the nerve to think they worship Yahweh! But they do it at their own temple, not the one in Jerusalem! And they don't have the teachings of the prophets! And they do what's called 'syncretic' worship, which is just a fancy word for "blended" or (in the eyes of the Jewish people) blasphemous horrible combo worship, borrowing stuff from pagan ceremonies and mixing it with Torah law into an abomination—like rock music in church! Like jeans on a pastor! Like a jumbotron TV over the altar!

And they intermarried with non-Jews! Again, we're bodies all the way down, and these people have mixed their covenantal blood with pagans. They're mixed people, ritually unclean, and can never, ever atone for it. There is no sacrifice great enough, no number of animals, no fasting, that can make up for their polluted bodies. I'll let you draw connections as you will—this is not that kind of sermon. But I did want to at least draw your attention to this.

So these folks are not just strangers—they're enemies. They're the 'there but the grace of God go I' people in Jewish culture.

So Samaria is NOT HOME. Jesus is on foreign turf here. Why they're in Samaria is a story for another time, but here they are. And Jesus, wandering, not at home, is THIRSTY. So he does the truly unthinkable. A Jewish man would never talk alone with a JEWISH woman, let alone a Samaritan one. Yet Jesus talks, directly, and alone, to a Samaritan woman, and asks her for **water**. First topsy-turvy moment.

Second moment: she reminds HIM of his religious duties: definitely not to drink from a vessel of a Samaritan (which would by default be ritually unclean).

Third moment: he engages in theological debate with a woman, a Samaritan woman. She knows, very well, the arguments against her very existence: she knows what the Jews say about her people. And Jesus basically speaks **against his own** by claiming that, in the end, where you worship will not matter. The way of God is open to all who thirst, to all who drink of the living water. All the dividing lines that make the Jewish people look down on the Samaritans will be erased—in fact, they're **already** erased by Jesus' very presence. The Us and Them bullhockey that we still LOVE to obsess over has **ALREADY** been undone. We think our us/them lines are so precious, so inviolable, but we ain't got **NOTHING** on the Jewish/Samaritan dividing line. And Jesus counteracts, and defies, centuries of discrimination, dismissal, rejection, and hate in this moment.

Fourth topsy-turvy moment: this **woman** evangelizes to her community, they **BELIEVE** her, and they come to Jesus. They believe in him. Some of the first converts in the Gospel of John are not Jews, not even Gentiles, but the most despised community, those whom the Temple Jews would reject completely. And they are brought to Christ on the testimony of a woman (compare this to when the disciples don't believe the testimony about the risen Lord when their women come to them).

So, in one day, Jesus upends just about every precious, inviolable social convention his culture has.

But there's one more topsy-turvy that's more metaphysical than social. In this story, **God** is the one who is thirsty.

It is one thing, in Exodus, to have a God who understands that physical and spiritual needs are intertwined, that his creatures need physical sustenance—they need food and water and shelter—and that these very simple things give them hope.

But in our Gospel reading, we don't just have a God who gets that—who understands. We have a God with a body, a God who knows **intimately** what thirst is, how powerful that need is. It is one thing to sort of intellectually grasp that thirstiness is not fun. It is of another order altogether to have a God who thirsts.

God knows we are bodies. God knows we bear our suffering in and as our bodies. God knows that our spiritual life is not a separate thing from our physical one, that the pain and suffering we can endure is always felt physically. But God knows this not because he's studied us, or even because he made us. God knows this on a far more intimate level. This is not book knowledge. This is lived experience. God so loved the world that he is a body, too. He literally feels our pain. So when Paul writes that our suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope, that this is not a laundry list of ways to fail God (as I've often read it before), nor is it a glorification of suffering for Jesus. Rather, we follow a God who suffers—not a God who stands on the sidelines and gives advice, but a God who joins the game.

So what is your thirst this morning? What are you parched for? Whatever it is, we feel it—physically. We carry our suffering in our bodies. Know that God does, too. Know that our Lord and Savior doesn't intellectualize our suffering—God **knows** it, intimately, has felt it himself. He's not standing outside, judging you. He's sitting by the well, with you, homeless, in a foreign land, just needing a cup of water, just needing to be seen. As K. writes, "God sees in secret, and knows the distress, and counts the tears, and forgets nothing."

As we walk through Lent together, please know that God walks with us. Amen.