

The Living Water of Reconciliation
Third Sunday of Lent (Year A) -- March 23, 2014

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

Two months ago, on January 17th, with students from Greenville College and students from Calvin College in Michigan, I crowded into the crypt of St. Photini the Samaritan Greek Orthodox Church in Nablus in the West Bank of Israel. We all stood watching for several minutes as Haley Fahrner cranked and cranked and cranked and cranked and cranked a bucket of water up out of the deep well that is now remembered as Jacob's well, the setting for today's gospel lesson. Haley muscled that water up out of the well, took a sip, and then passed the cup on to Maggie Tarr, and Maggie took a drink and passed it on, (perhaps to Edith and Lisa,); this continued until the cup had circulated the room and all 35 or 36 of us had the opportunity to drink water from the well, perhaps the same well that Jacob and Joseph and eventually Jesus and this nameless Samaritan woman drank from as well.

Water, life-giving water, is an important ingredient in our scripture lessons for today. In our first reading and referenced in the psalm we read together as well, we hear the Israelites lamenting their difficulties in the desert. It's a familiar lament. The Israelites are on the verge of attacking Moses because he (and thus God) brought them out into the desert to a place that doesn't have any water. They demand that Moses find some water for them. They complain vehemently. The Old Testament doesn't paint a very pretty picture of the Israelites most of the time, and our passage from Exodus today doesn't deviate from that pattern. But out of fairness to the Israelites, wouldn't most of us want to go back to Egypt if we were stuck in the desert without any water? (Although—if we have to choose between unfiltered Greenville water and no water at all, some of us might have a difficult time choosing.)

In response to Moses' appeal to God on their behalf, God sends them water. God uses Moses and the same staff that turned the Nile into blood to harvest water from the rock. God patiently gives the Israelites what they need in the simple but miraculous form of water springing from a rock, a symbol of God's gracious and consistent care for them. From God, their "rock of salvation," flows living water, and through the gift of this water, they are reconciled once again to God.

In our gospel lesson, water also serves as the pathway to God, in this case for a Samaritan woman. Last week we read the story of Jesus' meeting Nicodemus in Jerusalem. That story appears in John chapter three, the chapter preceding the story we have before us today. In many ways, the Samaritan woman in today's passage serves as a sort of foil for Nicodemus. While Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, didn't understand Jesus' message, this non-Jewish woman not only understood, but she led others to understand as well.

When he met Nicodemus, Jesus and the disciples had been in Jerusalem for Passover, but when they left there, they took their ministry out into the Judean countryside. In the opening verses of John chapter four, right before the passage we have for today, the gospel writer explains why Jesus made his next geographical move that brought him from the Judean political district to Jacob's well in the heart of the political district of Samaria. While Jesus and the disciples were ministering in the Judean countryside, news reached the Pharisees in Jerusalem that Jesus was baptizing even more people than John the Baptist. When Jesus learned what the Pharisees were being told, he decided it would be best to head back to his and the disciples homeland in Galilee rather than stay in Judea.

Even though the land of Israel was then as now fairly small, in first century Israel, the ten political districts that made up this region were quite distinct from one another. According to John's gospel, in order to go from Judea to Galilee, Jesus "had to go through Samaria." In a technical sense, this is true geographically. Moving from Jerusalem to Galilee meant traveling north through the districts of Judea and Samaria before reaching the

district of Galilee where Jesus and the disciples lived. But this gospel tells us Jesus and the disciples were in the Judean countryside, and they were baptizing. Chapter three places them, as well as John the Baptist and his disciples, near the Jordan River to the northeast of Jerusalem. If they were in fact baptizing in an area close to the Jordan River, then Jesus would not have needed to go through the heart of Samaria on his way back to Galilee. In fact, the route north through the valley would have been much more direct.

In addition to being out of the way, Jacob's well in Sychar, or what was more frequently referred to as Shechem, lies on the Patriarchal Highway, or the Way of the Patriarchs, an ancient north-south route that patriarchs like Abraham and Jacob would have travelled. Running parallel to the coast to its west and the Jordan River and Dead Sea to its east, the Patriarchal Highway follows a ridge from Beersheba in the southern desert up through Hebron, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Bethel, Shechem, and on north. Not only would it have been out of his way to return to the Patriarchal Highway and Shechem from the Jordan River Valley, because the Patriarchal Highway was the major north-south road in the middle of the land west of the Jordan River, it would have also been a busier and perhaps more conspicuous route for him to follow.

So why would the gospel writer say in verse three that Jesus "had to go through Samaria" as the explanation for why Jesus and the disciples end up in Shechem in the heart of Samaria if they were closer to a route on the eastern side of Samaria, a route that would take them more directly, quickly, and probably safely to Galilee especially if Jesus was trying to gain distance between himself and the Pharisees in Jerusalem? (These are the kinds of questions that keep you awake at night if you spend your January thinking about the history and geography of the Bible.) There are many different ways to read this passage, and many different sermons have and will continue to emerge from it. The sermon that emerged for me for today centers on this choice that Jesus makes in the gospel of John.

If Jesus' trip through the heart of Samaria isn't one of geographical convenience or mere happenstance, then what is it? Given the direction John takes the story, I believe the answer is that Jesus made a theological choice. Jesus chose to go through the heart of Samaria so that he might encounter Samaritans. By stopping at Jacob's well and asking the Samaritan woman for water, Jesus reconciled her to God through the living water of God and through her many more Samaritans were reconciled to God as well. The text tells us that they "heard" for themselves and recognized Jesus as "the Savior of the world."

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman isn't a part of any of the other gospel accounts, and John is the only gospel writer to mention a ministry of Jesus in Samaria. In fact, in the gospel of Matthew, as Jesus sends out his disciples to minister, he forbids them from entering any Samaritan towns. Besides John, among the gospel writers only Luke seems to be sympathetic toward Samaritans. He holds up a Samaritan as the only example of how to love one's neighbor in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In another account of Jesus' ministry, Luke also says that the only leper to thank Jesus among ten that Jesus cured was a Samaritan. But even Luke later shuns the Samaritans when he describes how Jesus rebuked a Samaritan village because they refused to take Jesus in when he was on his way to Jerusalem.

The Samaritans were enemies of the Jews. The people of Samaria looked at the world differently. For them the top of Mt. Gerizim in the heart of Samaria was the holy place on which to build the temple, to make sacrifices, to meet God—their holy place was not in Jerusalem. As Luke suggests in the parable of the Good Samaritan and John suggests in our passage for today, Jesus challenged these cultural boundaries that set Samaritans apart from Jews. In this passage, Jesus stops at Jacob's well outside Sychar or Shechem, near the base of Mt. Gerizim, to wait while the disciples went into town to get food. It is noon, they have been walking for a long time, and Jesus is not only tired and hungry, he is thirsty as well. While he is sitting there, the Samaritan woman comes to draw water at the well, and Jesus asks her for a drink. The conversation that follows is described as the longest dialogue that Jesus has with anyone in scripture. By asking her for a drink, Jesus

shocks the woman. With this one request, Jesus crosses three major cultural boundaries: the boundary of religion, the boundary of ethnicity, and the boundary of gender. The magnitude of his question is reflected in the woman's surprised response: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

First, there are the religious differences that separate them—a Jew and a Samaritan. In addition to their beliefs about Mt. Gerizim, Samaritans recognized only the Pentateuch or Torah as sacred scripture. Though John places the familiar term "Messiah" on the Samaritan woman's lips, it would have been unusual for her to use this term because the Samaritans did not expect a Messiah in the way the Jews did, in the sense of an anointed king from David's line; that idea postdates the Pentateuch. The Samaritans instead expected the return of a prophet like Moses who would "proclaim all things" to them. Because Jesus was a Jew who worshiped God in Jerusalem rather than on her ancestors' sacred mountain—that is, nearby Mt. Gerizim—the woman wouldn't have thought it possible for Jesus to be the prophet they awaited.

Jesus also crosses the line established between their ethnicities. Samaritans and Jews didn't marry one another, didn't eat together, and certainly didn't ask one another for a cup of water. In addition to the fact that the Samaritan woman is from the wrong side of the religious and ethnic fence, according to John her gender raised the disciples' eyebrows as well. John says that when they returned from getting food, "they were astonished that [Jesus] was speaking with a woman." Had they known this nameless Samaritan woman's history with men, they might have abandoned Jesus immediately. As it was, they didn't say anything about her, just as Jesus didn't condemn the woman or tell her she needed to repent.

Of what are considered the most likely "legitimate" "holy sites" in Israel, Jacob's well may be my favorite of those I've seen. Even though it is buried in the crypt under a modern Greek Orthodox church, it reminds me of the work of reconciliation that Jesus began at the well and he still calls us to today. The crypt where the well is located seems like a small place of refuge from what lies above it and in the city and region around it. When you leave the well and come up out of the crypt, you are surrounded by mosaics on the floor, stained glass in the windows and domed ceiling, icons and beautiful paintings on the walls, and to one side of the front of the church, the decaying body of Saint Philoumenos encased in glass. Philoumenos served as caretaker for the church until his death in 1979, but now his remains serve as a reminder that we live in a fallen world, a world that still desperately needs to drink from the living waters that lead to reconciliation with God.

According to the Greek Orthodox Church, Philoumenos was axed to death by "fanatic Zionist Jews" who murdered him while he was doing evening vespers at Jacob's well. Philoumenos's murder wasn't the first act of violence at this site. Historical records indicate that there have been several churches there throughout history, the earliest dating as far back as the 4th century. Throughout the church's history at Jacob's well, religious groups have argued, frequently violently and destructively, over who has the greatest right to the spot.

In the first century the city of Shechem where Jacob's well is located was in the heart of the political district of Samaria. Today Palestinians who live there call their city Nablus, and it is in the heart of what is now called the West Bank, on the inside of the separation barrier.

There are still Samaritans living in Nablus on Mt. Gerizim. Another small group of Samaritans lives on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. In the 4th century, the total Samaritan population is estimated to have been approximately 1.2 million. According to the Israelite Samaritan Information Institute, their total population had dwindled to only 140 by 1919, but as of January 2013, they numbered 754. After more than two thousand years, their principles of faith remain much the same. They believe 1) that they should always live in the Holy Land, 2) that they should participate in the Passover sacrifice on Mt. Gerizim every year, 3) that they should celebrate the Sabbath, and 4) that they should adhere to the laws of purity and impurity as outlined in the Torah.

In many ways, Nablus is very different from first-century Shechem, but in many ways it is similar. Nablus sits where Shechem sat, in the valley at the base of Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. In the same way that Jews in the first century might have avoided Samaria, Nablus and certain areas of the West Bank are avoided by some people today. Nablus is still embroiled in religious and ethnic controversy as the history of the church at the site of Jacob's well reminds us. If you want more evidence of the ongoing instability in and around Nablus, just Google "Nablus." On most days you will find at least one news report concerning violence that occurred there within the past week, if not more recently.

Besides Jacob's well, another reason I personally find Nablus interesting is that through the power of story, I feel as if I know some of the people of Nablus. For the past six years I have used a film called "Paradise Now" in my freshman COR 101 class. Nominated for an Academy Award in the foreign language film category in 2006, "Paradise Now" tells the story of two young Palestinian men from Nablus who were recruited to carry out a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. Even though the filmmakers had the permission of both the Israeli Defense Force and local militias to film, it was very difficult and frequently dangerous to film in Nablus. Sentiments for and against the crew swung back and forth between the Israelis and the Palestinians throughout the process, and filmmakers eventually had to relocate to Nazareth to complete the film, but I'm very thankful that they succeeded in making it. If it's possible that a film about this topic can be tasteful, not completely one-sided, and occasionally even ironically humorous, then I believe this film succeeded. It encourages me to see the humanity of a people that my world frequently tells me to hate, and isn't that what Jesus did and what he asks me to do as well?

Jacob's well reminds us of the hard work that Christ came to earth to begin for us. It reminds us that we have theological choices to make in our world all the time. It reminds us that religious, ethnic, and gender boundaries still exist, and that we need to challenge them every day. It reminds us that we serve a God who doesn't have favorites and who wants each of us to experience reconciliation. It reminds us that there is enough living water for us all.

Lord, help us to join in the work of reconciliation to which you have called us today. Help us to bring your living water to those who live without it. Amen.