



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Lent 3 (A)

#### The Woman at the Well

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

There is a story told of a little boy who was put to bed, only to ask for a drink of water. And again. And again. And again. Does this happen at anyone's house? Many parents know this well from when their children are small. Anyway, the dad, finally exasperated, says, "*If I hear that one more time*, I'm going to come up there and spank you!" Of course, the voice comes again: "Can I have a drink of water?" The dad says, "That's it!" and starts up the stairs. Out of the dark comes a small voice, "On your way, would you get me a drink of water?"

This is our Old Testament lesson of today in a nutshell.

The Israelites have been released from the worries of the day, as it were. They've been rescued out of Egypt, and what do they do? They murmur. They mumble. They complain. "Can I have a drink of water?" "Would you get me a drink of water?" "Why did you take us out of Egypt, only to let us die of thirst?" They get their drink of water.

There is a lot said about water this morning as we hear that same request in today's gospel story: Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink of water. What's this story about?

If we believe generations of preachers, it's about a sinful woman whose sexual wantonness is discovered – and about Jesus telling her how many "husbands" she'd had, though she was not wife to any of them. And with the placement of this story in the lections for the Lenten season, of course, the emphasis is on sin and repentance and moral purity – except that it's not.

This isn't a story about morality, sexual or otherwise. It has nothing to do with making a point about adultery. It certainly doesn't say anything about the wanton behavior of the men she was with. (Have you ever noticed that nothing is ever said about the men's behavior?)

Stories with women at the center don't happen very often in our scripture. For some reason, we – at least the "we" of history and tradition – want to understand the story as a miniature morality lesson with a woman as the tawdry example.

Take Eve, for example. Eve is castigated as the one through whom sin and death entered the world, and all her descendant sisters – that’s all of the ladies! – bear her stain. Not very often will you hear a preacher extol Eve as the mother of the human race, pleasing partner to the first man, created in God’s image – as the biblical story tells it.

And then there is Mary Magdalene, friend of Jesus, one of his first disciples. We know her as whore and harlot, though *none* of that comes from scripture. It is tradition, created by men. How often have you heard her celebrated as the first witness to the Resurrection, as a teacher of faith, as the first apostle?

Women are not very often at the center of our scripture stories, and we do them and ourselves a disservice if we dismiss them too quickly as exemplars of immorality and little else. We miss what is most important when we take the easy way out, make the woman a villain, and call it quits with that. They’re not in there because of who they are, though the details set the stage for how remarkable Jesus’ message is, to be sure. They’re in there because they did something important, something worth noting and remembering, something that sets a good example of faith. Women show up so infrequently in our scripture stories, that when they are there, it might be a signal to look closer, dig deeper, wait for the critical message that will be revealed.

If we look in a Bible that names stories – you know the kind, it puts story titles on the top of the page - we’ll see that this story from John’s Gospel is often known simply as *The Woman at the Well*. Sometimes it is known as *The Woman of Samaria*. Both of these factors are important to the story in identifying who she was:

First, a woman. Second, a Samaritan woman. Third, an *immoral* Samaritan woman. Well, of course she’s immoral. Is there any other kind of Samaritan? Any other kind of woman?

By anyone’s reckoning, she is a rather poor choice for an illustration of goodness – someone highly incredible as a disciple. And as a witness, one who offers testimony? Not worth considering. In her own time, she was nobody to a Jewish man.

This is the longest conversation recorded in the New Testament between Jesus and *anybody*. There has to be something in this story more important than how many men she had known.

Consider the story. Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water. She expresses her astonishment that he would talk to her. He says to her that if she only knew who he was, she’d be asking *him* for a drink – of *living water*. She says, “Okay. May I have a drink of this water?” He says, “Go. Call your husband!” Now, to this point, she’s talking about plain old well water. And while that’s the drink that Jesus asked from her, it is not the water he offers to her.

So, still with well water in mind, she engages the conversation and doesn’t call anyone.

*After* the woman realizes Jesus is the Messiah, *after* she realizes what he's been talking about as "living water," she takes her new and tentative and shallow and not-yet-fully-formed faith and *tells someone* about it.

She went back to the city, the scripture says, and talked to people about her experience. "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony... And many more believed because of [Jesus'] word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'"

That's the highpoint of this story: the believers! And it all got started when she believed – and when she told someone else of her belief.

Her understanding may have been incomplete; "He can't be the Messiah, can he?" But it was enough to hook people, to pique their curiosity, to invite them in. "Many Samaritans in that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony." This woman, who is often remembered badly in church history for her sexual relationships, who would not have been considered a credible witness, was an early disciple.

This woman, whose witness and testimony were only as strong as: "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" brought many to faith.

Now think: How will history remember you? Will it be for your behavior? Or for your testimony?

This woman, the Samaritan woman at the well, is an example to us of discipleship. However strong or weak or confused or partial or new or unclear or even *certain* your faith: When was the last time you talked with someone about faith so that *they* might believe?

We sing at Christmas, "Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills, and everywhere!" And throughout the year, we sing hymns like this one from Charles Wesley: "Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim, and publish abroad his wonderful Name; the Name all-victorious of Jesus extol: his kingdom is glorious; he rules over all."

The encouragement to spread the Good News, to talk of faith and the wonders of God, permeates our scripture and rings in our hymns. That's what this gospel story is about: not a woman at all, but about Jesus and the *living water* poured from his hand.

When asked for a drink of water, what will you offer from your own well? Amen.

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