

“The Water of Our Ancestors”

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Exodus 17.1-7

John 4.5-42

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Today’s Gospel reading is a lengthy one, full of character description and details. I always think I’ll cut this passage short when it comes up in the lectionary but it’s so good, and I think the whole context is helpful. It takes us on a journey from the past, to the present, to the future with just Jesus and the woman at the well, who goes unnamed.

The setting is a well in Sychar, a well with deep history. This is the well that Jacob, our spiritual ancestor, met his wife. Jesus has been traveling and he stops at this well - knowing it’s history. A woman walks up to the well and Jesus asks her for a drink. This woman has many comments and questions, which tells us that this scenario is out of sorts for the cultural context.

First, at that time, no one associated with Samaritans. Second, being at noon, usually women were at the well and men were not, because it was like the Tinder of ancient Israel - you went there to meet someone if you were there at a specific time.

So, this woman has her guard up because so much of this is unusual. Including, that Jesus has asked for help getting water, and he doesn’t have a bucket or a cup. Then, Jesus begins talking very cryptically about living water - distinguishing a difference between the water from this well and what Jesus is offering. He sees her as herself, and when he tells her that she is correct in saying she doesn’t have a husband, she realizes he is a prophet.

The woman has already noticed that there is something interesting about him, unusual - and now she sees that he perceives who she is, and she talks about the Messiah. Jesus says outright, he is the Messiah. In other gospels Jesus tries to keep his identity a secret, but here he says it out loud. He isn’t denying it.

The disciples return, scandalized that Jesus is talking to a woman at the well, but doesn’t talk to her and doesn’t address the situation. She merely leaves and goes to evangelize what she has heard. I love to remind people that she was the first evangelist in the New Testament - not just the first female, but the first person to listen to Jesus and spread the word. He sought her out to be the voice of truth in that place.

If Jesus is the Living Water, the woman at the well was eroding the soil to create a channel for the water to travel. I think on our best days, we try to create new channels for that water - opportunities for the growth of spirituality in the world. And just like a river, we can go upstream and see the history - those who have dug out trenches and made space for faith before us.

I like what Olaf the snowman says in *Frozen 2* - water has memory. I especially think Living Water has memory - of the saints who have gone before us. Our faith is one of stories, which we tell each Sunday as we hear the good news, as we tell at the table when we break bread, as we remember to lift us up when we feel lost.

In fact, we tell stories like the one in Exodus. Moses had rescued the Israelites from Pharaoh and oppression in Egypt. They were enslaved, and God told Moses to go - to take the people to the Promised Land, which was unknown. Moses parted the sea with his rod and led the people into the wilderness for forty years. Throughout those years, this specific exchange that we read today happens over and over. The people have a concern, they complain, they Moses talks to God, and God offers a solution.

In this specific passage, the people are thirsty. Archeology has shown that this place mentioned was, in fact, dry, and the people would have been very thirsty. There are many ways we can express ourselves when we are tired and hungry and exhausted - but we know that when we have reached that point, often we have difficulty controlling our tone and we complain, or yell, or become snarky. The people are at this point.

Moses tells God they are thirsty, and God offers them water through the same rod of their past hitting a rock in which water flows out.

Water has memory. We remember the ways in which we have been shaped by the saints who have gone before us, building up programs in the church or teaching us lessons and values. We embody that. I've been reading Rev. Dr. Teri Ott's book, *Necessary Risks*. In it she talks about Shannon Sullivan discussing white culture has changed and "commodified" history. Ott goes on to say, "if we belong to history, history possesses itself. It stands alone and cannot be manipulated by those who have the most power."<sup>1</sup> When we listen to stories other than ours, other than the winners who wrote history, we hear a fuller story, which reshapes the water.

And - we know that water travels its own path. We can dig a trench for water to flow from one place to another, but if the current is fast enough it can carve its own way, or if it floods and overflows it can cause a new path. We do not control the Living Water. We make space for it to be available.

Lent is considered a dry season. It is a time when we feel parched because we have taken away the celebration of faith and focused on how we have strayed from God. Though, because water has memory, I believe it is never too far, for it seeks us, as well. Water might seem like it can be contained, but it evaporates, it moves, it soaks into soil. Someone gave me a container of Holy Water many years ago. I put that container on my shelf and it even moved with me here. But - it evaporated. It is in the moisture in the air. So that even when we cannot find the Living Water, we can rest assured that particles of that Holy Water are in the air that we breathe. When we complain about the humidity this summer - and we will - we can also remember that the water in the air reminds us that God is near.

Through your wilderness journey, know that God's Living Water never leaves us - it is within us, it is part of us, and we are the vessels that carry it and pave the way. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Teri Ott, *Necessary Risks: Challenges Privileged People Need to Face*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 44.