



# *Third Sunday of Lent*

## *Sermon by Revd Sharmain James*



Sunday 12 March 2023

### READINGS

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

## *Living water*

He thought he'd lost everything. He'd lost his job. He'd lost his car. He'd lost his self-respect. And now he was losing his family. The one thing he couldn't seem to lose was his thirst. Emily had told him if he came home drunk and ornery one more time she'd take the kids and leave. Now she and the kids were living at her sister's. What he didn't realize was that we are all thirsty, all longing for a drink of something that will satisfy. It's just that he kept trying to quench his thirst at the wrong wells.

In today's gospel reading from John – we hear that Jesus and his disciples, weary and thirsty from a day's journeying, stop outside the city of Sychar. Jesus sends his disciples into the city for food and waits for them in the withering heat, taking a seat near the town's well – the one made famous by ancestor Jacob. This is not an incidental detail of the story! Wells are important places in the Bible. Especially in the Hebrew Bible, the well is a classic setup for important plot points: - when people gather at a well, something important is about to happen. They are often a place of revelation, rich in spiritual and emotional meaning.

The ancient Jewish audiences hearing this story would have immediately remembered the other well stories, the boy-meets-girl-at-the-well stories wherein the faith heroes meet, marry, and alter the course of salvation history. Way back in the Book of Genesis, Abraham sent his servant to fetch a wife for his son Isaac. After a journey of over 500 miles, with ten camels carrying the dowry for the bride-to-be, Isaac's beautiful cousin Rebekah introduced herself by drawing up the hundreds of gallons of water needed for those camels. Her generosity—and strength!—touched Abraham's servant deeply. Rebekah left the next day to build a new life with Isaac, the promised son of Abraham and Sarah.

Fast-forward a generation, and Jacob, the younger of Rebekah's twin sons, arrived at that same well. The beautiful Rachel appeared. She and her sister Leah became his wives, and, along with two concubines, would go on to be the mothers of the ten tribes of Israel. Four hundred years later, Moses met his wife Zipporah at a well in the desert. In each of these stories, when the characters gather at a well, a thirst is quenched: a thirst for authentic love, connection, and relationship. We could even say that the well itself serves as a symbol of deep emotional thirst. So in the Bible, wells can be a place of rich and unexpected encounters: a place where love is discovered, uncovered, or revealed.

In our gospel reading Jesus sits at a well far from home—He notices a lone woman emerge from the city gate and make her way toward the well. She is carrying a large jug balanced on her shoulder. Jesus knew all about water. Growing up in the rocky, dry land of Israel, he knew first hand that water was a precious

resource that didn't come easily. He must have grown up seeing his mother and countless other women spend hours of their days fetching water for cooking, cleaning and drinking. So when Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well - he could appreciate the hard work that was required to draw enough water from the deep well in order to meet the needs of her family. A great deal of ink has been spilled about this woman and her supposed "shady past. Modern understandings of John 4 often depicts the Samaritan woman as an adulteress.

let's not forget that women in Jesus' day were no different than property like land or animals. And so this woman likely was either widowed by her first husband or tossed to the curb. And her "husbands" after that were probably his brothers or cousins who were obliged by religious law to care for her. However, adding another mouth to feed is not simple. And she is passed into the care of one family after another. The last might be a very distant relative or even a wealthy gentile willing to care for this woman. And these circumstances are not this woman's fault, - she has no control over these things. But despite this, being married five times still carries a stigma of being damaged goods. So this Samaritan woman comes to the well in the heat of the day, while all the other women come in the early morning and late evening when it is cool. And she comes alone, to avoid the gossip.

Jesus never speaks to her about sin or expresses that she requires or has received forgiveness. Instead, he ask her for a drink. And the woman is shocked by this request. She has come to the well to draw water alone, and likely never expected to encounter a Jew. And almost certainly would never think that this Jew would talk to her, a Samaritan and a woman...Jesus would be forbidden by law to strike up a conversation. But the two of them - They speak like rabbi to rabbi. Where do we worship and how do we worship and is there a place for me in worshiping God? Jesus and the unnamed woman of Samaria is the longest theological discussion in the four Gospels and one of the few times Jesus reveals he is the Messiah.

In exchange for the water the Samaritan woman offers him, - Jesus promises her "living water." She is spiritually thirsty as well. When she hears what Jesus is offering she is immediately ready for the living water that he promises. "Sir, give me this living water, that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." And the well walls burst open and life rushes back into this woman. She immediately runs back to her village. She runs back to the very people she has been trying to avoid. She runs to tell them her story, she runs to bring them to the Messiah. Her life is so transformed by simply talking to Jesus at the well. One encounter changes everything. A woman with no name and a hurtful past discovers that someone has "found" her and loved her at last:

The well at noon on a hot day in Samaria becomes, for a half an hour, a place of grace and encounter, where this woman's deepest spiritual and emotional thirsts are quenched in Jesus. And Jesus, who thirsts to reveal who he is to God's people, but who is not having an easy time of it with the Pharisees and the Jews of his day, has found another disciple in the Samaritan woman. He has found in her someone with eyes to see and ears to hear: a woman ready to see God in him. Not everyone wanted the water Jesus was offering. Not everyone wanted to hear who Jesus really was: the Messiah, the Christ. But this woman does! Her spiritual thirst gives her open ears and an open heart. In Jesus she found what she was looking for, and she was able to leave her bucket behind at last. She also had good news enough to share and sought out her whole village to share it with. That's why she has become one of the classic Lenten examples of discipleship. We have come here this morning, hoping for just such an encounter with Jesus. It is he who knows the deepest thirsts of our hearts. Jesus' invitation to the Samaritan woman holds for us, as well. He continues to welcome the thirsty who are seeking the living water only he can give. Without everyday water the body withers. Without Living Water so does the spirit. The quenching of both thirsts can begin at some pretty important wells. Amen