

Sermon Title: "Come to the Well"
Scriptures: Psalm 25:1-10, John 4:3-30
Location: Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
Date: February 18, 2018, First Sunday of Lent
Preacher: Grace Boyer

Before the John 4 passage is read, I want to give some background. You will hear the name of the city of Sychar. This was near Shechem, which was at the mountain pass between Mt. Gerezim and Mt. Ebal on the eastern edge of the Israel of Jesus' day.

- In Genesis, Abraham had built an altar to God at Shechem (Gen 12:6-7).
- Shechem was where Jacob had decided to buy land for his home, and erected an altar and put his well-known well (Gen 33:18-20).
- It was in Shechem where Joseph's bones were buried when the Israelites returned from slavery in Egypt (Joshua 24:32).
- Mt. Gerezim was where God had commanded the Israelites to enter the Promised Land and pronounce the blessing before entering the land (Deut 11:29, 27:12).
- Mt. Gerezim was where Joshua had held his speech, "as for me and my house we will serve the Lord," while renewing the Sinai covenant (Joshua 24:1,15).

This is all to say that the region around Sychar, the location of our story from John 4, was in an important place, a place weighted with meaning.

Read John 4:3-30

The local pastor was taking us to the village well. We were in Africa, in the northern part of Malawi, near a place called Mzuzu. I was visiting with Jim McGill, a Presbyterian missionary that the church I served in Florida was supporting. One of Jim's responsibilities was clean water issues.

So the pastor was taking us to the well that served the surrounding villages. We had long since left the paved highway, and long since left the red clay dirt road that led to the pastor's home. We were heading down the hill, through cornfields and crops, down to the footpaths, worn and packed down earth, worn down by the generations.

As we came around the corner and into the clearing I saw the women lined up. They were sitting on a low wall waiting their turns. Most had a baby on their back, wrapped close by a cloth. Some arrived by themselves, others came in groups of twos or threes. Older children were left at home, while these women took this time to come to the well before the sun set. The women were talking, laughing and sharing about their days. It was their familiar routine.

I was struck by the gracefulness of the women as they balanced the baby on their back and then slowly raised the five gallon plastic containers filled with water to their heads and began the careful journey home, barefoot on those dirt footpaths. The strength of their necks, their poise, their smiles!

I was also struck by the centrality of water to their lives: for drinking, cooking, washing, cleaning, living. This journey to the well was an indispensable part of their life. In order to live they HAD to come to the well day in and day out.

The Samaritan woman from our story in John 4 had to come to the well, day in and day out. Just like the women in Malawi, Africa. And one day, in the midst of her daily chores, she arrives and finds a tired and weary Jesus sitting at the well, around noon.

Now much has been made over the years by biblical scholars about the fact that the unnamed woman came at noon, in the heat of the day. Why not in the cool of the morning or the evening with the rest of the women, as was the custom? Was she trying to avoid the other women? Perhaps. Or perhaps a child or the donkey knocked over the water jar. Or guests showed up at her doorstep and in typical middle-eastern hospitality she found herself making a meal for a houseful rather than her family. Or perhaps she was in the midst of spring cleaning! We just don't know.

I have certainly made a run to the grocery store at an unexpected time when I realized I was out of something. And I remember clearly one night when the city announced that the sewer system in my neighborhood had been compromised and the tap water wasn't drinkable. I raced to the grocery store at 11:30 pm, grateful to find out it was still open so I could buy gallons of water. An unscheduled trip to my well in the middle of the night.

The other thing that is made much of by biblical scholars is the mention of the woman's five husbands. Some scholars have speculated on the woman's character, as if somehow she was to blame. But at that time a woman had to belong to some man's home, if she was to have a home. Whether it was a father, brother, husband, uncle, some person had to take her in or she would be homeless, because she could not have a home of her own. (Reading this passage with the backdrop of the Room in the Inn homeless women with us this past week has added a deeper dimension for me.)

Jesus does not seem to judge the woman or condemn her. He just uses the information to let her know that he knows her. He KNOWS her and what her life has been, what she had been through. We do not know the Samaritan woman's story, but whatever it was, Jesus' knowing it made her trust that he was someone who could see, a prophet, a wise man.

And so, the woman grabbed her chance. When she realized she had a prophet there, she asked THE question of the day. THE religious question of the day that was dividing the Jews and the Samaritans, and was hotly debated within the communities. The question was, "Where should we worship? In the temple in Jerusalem or on Mt. Gerezim?" (Mt. Gerezim, of course, being within eyesight of the well.) It may not be the question we would have asked, but it was THE political, religious, and societal question of her day. The divisive issue, the elephant in the room whenever a Jew and a Samaritan came into conversation. And so when the woman got her chance to talk to a prophet, she asked it.

You see, at the time of our story, Jews and Samaritans had such bitter feelings towards one another, and such conflicting descriptions of each other. Jews thought that Samaritans were foreign settlers, brought in by the Assyrian empire when they conquered the northern kingdom of Israel centuries before (2 Kings 17:24). Jews thought the Samaritans had brought with them their 5 gods and mixed and meshed it with Israelite religion, and they had dared to build a rival sanctuary on Mt. Gerezim in the 4th century BCE instead of supporting the temple in Jerusalem. They didn't even follow the ritual cleanliness laws that the Jews held sacred. According to the Jews, the Samaritans were unclean foreigners who were ignorant of the truth.

The Samaritans, on the other hand, had an equally unkind view of the Jews. Samaritans called themselves the "Shamerim", which means the observers of the Torah, and they felt that the first five books of our Bible (Genesis through Deuteronomy) were the only true scriptures. So in their minds, the Jews had polluted the Bible and deviated from the truth by adding the prophets and the writings to the only true books from Moses. Samaritans viewed themselves as descendants of Joseph, living continuously in the land given to Joseph's son Manasseh. Samaritans said they had remained in the land and maintained the true faith of Moses and the heritage of the Northern Kingdom of Israel when others were taken off into exile. And while King David may have chosen Jerusalem as his capital of

Judah and built a temple there, in the Samaritan's minds, God had chosen Mt. Gerezim near Shechem. In stories about Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Joshua, to the Samaritans scripture proved over and over again that God had chosen Shechem and Mt. Gerezim for God's religious sanctuary.

So who do you believe? Who is right? The Jews felt they were in the right and were the true and correct believers. The Samaritans felt they were in the right and were the true and correct believers. And so they argued, neither one willing to back down, each convinced they had a monopoly on the truth, and a proud past. And their sanctuaries were within 40 miles of each other (the distance from Montreat to Marshall). Down through history we keep playing this dynamic out, don't we? Though the issues and groups may change.

So Jesus, a Jew, meets a Samaritan woman at a well, and they begin to talk. And when the woman realizes she is in the presence of a wise prophet, she asks him THE hotly debated question of her day: Where should we worship? And it is interesting how Jesus answers. He doesn't say it is Jerusalem, as you would have expected a Jew to answer. Instead he says the answer is "neither Mt. Gerezim nor Jerusalem." "True worshippers will worship [God] in spirit and truth." In spirit and in truth. It is not about location. It is not about location, but intention and attitude.

But what does it mean to worship in spirit and truth? I think part of it means being thirsty. We learn a bit about thirstiness from our story in John 4.

First the woman who came to the well was physically thirsty. She had come to the well to get water in order to live. When we come to worship we bring our bodies, bodies that break down, and get sick, hungry and thirsty. We recognize that we are human with all its frailties. There is a humbleness that comes from knowing that, knowing that God is God and we are not, and that we need God to live. As a community of faith, we share this fragileness with each other. (It is the Ashes to Ashes and Dust to Dust of Ash Wednesday.)

I witnessed an example of this last week during the prayer concerns at my husband's congregation. A young man in his twenties was sharing something that had crushed his heart and spirit. He was sitting on the floor crying as he shared. An eighty-eight year old in the congregation decided he wanted to go and sit on the floor beside the young man in solidarity, but his back and legs would not bend to do it. So three of us helped the older gentleman to the floor. The eighty-eight year old's body may have been broken but his spirit was strong and he wanted to hold and comfort the twenty year old whose heart and spirit were crushed. Being physically thirsty means recognizing we need each other and we need God.

Second, the woman was intellectually thirsty, curious about the issues of her day, and plain out strong and fierce. But while she may have had her own opinions about temples, she was willing to ask hard questions and listen, even to an enemy, in order to learn more. When we come to worship thirsty, it means we come curious, using the brains that God has given to us, our minds to seek and search and try to understand life, and wrestle with the news of shootings, and the world that swirls around us. We ask these questions in the presence of God and each other. Raw, honest questions, open to learning and growing. It is interesting the questions we ask when we are thirsty.

If you were to meet Jesus at the well today, in the midst of running around doing the ordinary routines of your life, ... if you were to meet Jesus at the well today, what would your question be?

Third, the woman came to the well spiritually thirsty. She said she was waiting for the messiah, hoping for the day when she would encounter God's messenger. Coming to worship thirsty means coming hoping/expecting/wanting an encounter with God. In my experience, when I have not prepared my own heart for worship, it doesn't matter how well planned a worship service is, it just

doesn't connect. But if my heart and spirit are open in some way, then God can use any service to get through to me. It is not about the location or format, Jesus said, but the intention and attitude. In that sense, coming to worship is a coming to the well expecting to meet Jesus, and bringing our thirsty selves, body, mind and soul. That is part of what it means to worship in spirit and in truth.

I have always liked how our story ends. In verse 28 the woman leaves her water jar by the well and goes into the village and tells the people about Jesus. She leaves the jar by the well. She had come to the well because water was at the heart of sustaining her life, it was central to her life, but she left the jar because she found something she needed even more, was thirsting for even more.

In this season of Lent, I invite you to find time to come to the well, come to the waters. Whatever that well may look like. Lent is a time of reflection, introspection, examination of our lives and the world around us. It is a time to notice where we are thirsty and why. It is a time to sit at the well with Christ, ask the questions that have been burning inside. Time to peer down into the dark well, the cool water reflecting back at you. Reflect on what needs to be taken with you as we journey with Jesus to the cross, the grave, and the empty tomb. And reflect on what needs to be left behind so we can walk in freedom.

So, are you thirsty? In this season of Lent, Come to the well.