

3/12/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl, as we gather to worship the living God, albeit with one hour less of sleep.

I could complain about Daylight savings time while it is still winter, and why anyone ever thought it was a good idea to not have the sun come up until almost 8 in the morning. But, if you are into having a BBQ in 40 degrees, they'll be daylight until about 8 pm now.

Today is the third Sunday of the season of Lent, a season where we are mindful of our brokenness and thirst for the resurrection life of Jesus.

May you taste the cool, life-giving pure water of the life that Jesus gives and may you experience the fellowship of this body of believers in the Holy Spirit in our gathering today.

CALL TO WORSHIP

(From The Soil and the Seed, Vol 6 booklet)

***Jesus, you are the source. You sustain us* (Congregation echo)**

Giver of living water; You come in humility and ask for a drink.

You meet us with a gift: deep, lasting life; Life now and in the age to come

May the water you give bubble up in us and flow out.

***Jesus, you are the source. You sustain us* (echo)**

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Christ,

Be the source of life within us. Quench our thirst.

Let us taste the living water that is within you that waters our parched spirits and restores our souls. Let us worship you our Maker as a people under your care.

Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Lord, we long for living water. We thirst for life.

And yet

we have drunk deeply of resentment;

we have savored self-centeredness.

We confess to God. . .

(silent prayer)

Leader: Today, O God, let us hear your voice.

All: *Give us this living water
so we may never thirst again. Amen.*

LIVING WATER

John 4:5-42

Our son Josiah loves water – especially flowing water. In the summer he likes going to the pool, and jump in the water repeatedly.

He’s usually eager to play in the bath tub, and he also enjoys playing with the faucet of the sinks. He has no concept of water bills or water conservation. It’s too much fun to turn on the tap and feel the endless flowing water.

For people in Jesus’ day, and still in many countries today, unfettered access to water is a luxury. Water is essential for life, and there’s never enough. Flowing spring water might be something you’d only see during the rainy season of the year.

In our Gospel story this morning, Jesus and his disciples are traveling from Judah in the south to Galilee. Last week, we listened in on Jesus’ conversation with the Pharisee and teacher Nicodemus. Jesus became aware that his movement was getting attention and that the Pharisees were talking about him.

Maybe to avoid the tensions, Jesus decides to go back to the region of Galilee. The shortest route goes through Samaria. The Samaritans are a people of mixed ancestry, both Israelite – tracing back to the Northern Kingdom – as well as other ethnic groups. They had a similar faith to Judeans, but instead of worshipping God in Jerusalem, their sacred place was Mount Gerizim.

The Samaritan version of the law of Moses commanded worship there. They had a shrine there until an army of Judeans destroyed it. Judeans despised Samaritans. They were enemies and heretics. Many travelers opted for a slightly longer route along the Jordan river, rather than going through Samaria.

In the heat of the day, Jesus and his disciples stopped in the village of Sychar, possibly the same city known in the Old Testament as Shechem. The disciples went into the town to buy food, while Jesus sat down at the well they believed was built by Jacob. It’s a place full of history.

In the heat of the day, a local woman comes to the well to draw water.

INTERCULTURAL READING OF THE BIBLE

Some years ago, there was an intercultural Bible reading project on this exact passage.

Participants ranged from Colombian Catholics to Dutch Protestants to Latino men in US prison.

They read and discussed the story of Jesus encountering the woman at the well. They had opportunity to exchange ideas with a partner group from a different country.¹

This project showed that the questions people bring to a biblical story and the meaning people take from it depends a lot on the context and life experience of the readers. Readers from non-Western cultures, and who were on the margins of their culture tended to read the Bible as directly addressed to them and their situation.

They identified with the Samaritan woman, and found hope in Jesus' encounter with her. Readers who came from communities where they had to go to a communal well to access water could pick out details we tend to miss.

Think about what it would be like to be traveling in the heat of the day: Jesus isn't just asking for a drink because he wants to make conversation or quickly move to a spiritual lesson. Jesus was surely physically thirsty.

In a warm country, noon would be an odd time to come to the well. Just like in Kansas you might try to work in the yard or garden early in the morning rather than 3 pm on a 100-degree day, people would try to fetch water for the day in the morning when it was cooler. This woman may be coming to the well in the heat of the day because she is a kind of outcast, not one of the regular women of the village.

Jesus asks her for a drink. He probably would have liked an actual drink of water, but had no bucket or way of getting it from the well. The woman is shocked to hear him speak to her. Men didn't talk to unknown women in that culture, let alone a Jewish man talk to a Samaritan woman.

If the woman offered Jesus water, it would mean he would be using her bucket or water jar. Jews could not share a vessel with any Samaritan without making themselves ritually unclean. This seems to be of no concern to Jesus.

He says to the woman, "If you knew the free gift of God and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would ask him and he would give you living water."

So they begin a conversation that starts with a misunderstanding. "Living water" was the phrase people used to express the idea of flowing water – like water in a spring or creek.

Just like Nicodemus took Jesus' words literally and wondered how anyone can be born a second time, the woman is confused how this thirsty man with no bucket has knowledge of a source of spring water in the middle of the desert.

But Jesus isn't talking only about physical water. He is drawing from the physical experience of quenching thirst to point to a spiritual reality.

The woman was ready to listen. She was open.

¹ See *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, edited by Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker, Marleen Kool, and Daniel Schipani. Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004.

It is common for many readers to judge this woman. Jesus knows that she has been with five men, and is not currently married. Many readers assume she must be an adulteress, a woman of loose morals.

Yet there are more possibilities. She could have been in multiple Levirate marriages – where a woman who was widowed would become the wife of a brother of the deceased husband. Or perhaps these husbands divorced her, and the most recent refused to marry her. She is in a precarious situation.

Whatever the situation, Jesus gives not a word of condemnation. Jesus' interest was to speak of Living Water. Jesus did not ask about her husband to confront her. Rather Jesus showed the woman that he saw her. He knew her.

Earlier in the Gospel of John, Jesus told the disciple Nathaniel, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." This probably impressed Nathaniel because Jesus wasn't there to see him with his eyes.

When I was in college, I served as a camp counselor one summer. At one of the camps, one of the adult leaders supposedly had the gift of "prophecy." He prayed with people individually and in small groups and could say very perceptive things about what they carried in their hearts.

One of my friends who I had never seen emotional before was in tears. The guy prayed with me at one point, naming perceptive things he could tell about her. One phrase stuck with me: "You have a hidden self and don't know how to express it."

For a long time afterward, I thought this guy must have had a real gift in order to be able to say that. Eventually I realized it could be possible to make some perceptive educated guesses using vague language. Lots of people could identify with the same statements, even though I might think I'm unique.

At any rate, I believe this kind of "prophetic" or "spiritual" gaze into the soul is what Jesus was offering the Samaritan woman. So she said, "Sir, I see you are a prophet."

They begin a rare interfaith conversation about worship. The woman knows well that there is a bitter divide between Judean Jews and Samaritans including around the proper place to worship God. Is it in the temple on Mount Zion or atop Mt. Gerizim?

Jesus spoke of a true worship of God that is neither in Jerusalem, nor the holy mountain of the Samaritans, transcending these religious divides. In the course of conversation, Jesus reveals himself to be the Messiah, the one who will offer the way to true encounter with God.

At that point the woman left her water jug and rushed off to the village to tell what she had witnessed. She was too excited to take the time to haul the water back with her.

Unlike Nicodemus who talked to Jesus at night, she met Jesus in the middle of the day and became the first Evangelist, convincing her whole village to want to meet Jesus. Unlike Nicodemus, this woman got it. How ironic that an unnamed woman of an enemy people is the first Evangelist.

Jesus is the one who sees us, knows us, and loves us. Jesus sees us in our flaws, in our weakness, and in all the way that people and life have wounded us. In that knowing and in that love, Jesus invites us to drink from a fountain of spiritual water that forever quenches thirst.

Jesus invites us to “eternal life,” which could be translated “Life of Ages” or “endless life.” There is no suggestion that one must wait until after death to taste this life. This life of ages is available now when we encounter and are transformed by Jesus.

Lent is an appropriate time to consider practices that can connect us to God in our brokenness or need.

One practice might be to find a source of fresh, flowing water. Spend some moments contemplating the water. Take in this experience through your physical senses in order to connect to Jesus as the source of life, like flowing water.

Another is to pay attention to your own sensations of thirst or quenching of thirst. Rather than being too quick to get a drink, be present to the experience of thirst and let that remind you of your thirst for God. (This is the purpose of the traditional practice of fasting).

You might also spend time in reflection: If you were in the position of the woman at the well, what would Jesus say about your life? What would it feel like for all your secrets or shame to be openly named, while also receiving an invitation to life of ages?

What is your disposition toward other people? Who do you know that are a little like the Samaritan woman. Who are the people you discount or don't expect much from? How does this account of the first Evangelist turn your assumptions on their head?

I invite us to consider practices like these and to open ourselves to Jesus, the source of Living Water, the one who loves us as we are, and who calls us in a deeper kind of relationship not only with God, but also with the people that are in our midst.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

1. What do you find most compelling about Jesus' conversation with this woman?
2. How can we be challenged by her example?
3. What boundaries did Jesus cross in speaking with her?

BENEDICTION

May God pour out the Holy Spirit on us.

May we well-up with rich flowing water of abundant life through our connection to Jesus.

May we bear witness and bring joy and refreshment to others.