

Thirsting for Living Water

A Sermon by **Rev. Laurie McKnight-Walker**

Biblical References: Exodus 17:1–7, John 4:5–42

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How do you boil an egg? Well, Will and I discovered a new way to boil an egg on our recent vacation to the Caribbean. On one of the islands, I believe it was Dominica, we visited one of the island's tourist sights which was a sulfa spring that was hot enough to boil an egg – 220C. After standing around the hot bubbling sulfa smelling springs for about 7 minutes (I should have time it), our guides produced two well cooked eggs, which most of us declined eating. The ground we stood on around the springs was a slippery mass of muck and rock which easily broke into pieces and could have sent someone tumbling into the hot springs.

On route to the springs, an American woman who ran a rather primitive looking spa on the grounds tried to sell us each a small tub of sulfa mud, with a promise that it would heal just about all of our aches, pains, skin rashes and other imperfections. I was skeptical, as usual, but a Scottish man who stood beside me at the edge of the spring, began to testify to me at length that a similar concoction, brought to him by his daughter from New Zealand, had healed him of his arthritis and a few other ailments I didn't quite remember.

I was quite frankly more intrigued by one of our guides, a friendly young man from the local area with a raspy voice and one leg which he used very well to hop around the slippery slopes. I wondered how it was that he was so cheerful, warm and protective of us, the rich foreign tourists, when it was clear that physically he was so lacking in health care. His personality seemed to bubble up continuously with humour and care as he shepherded us here and there through the rain forest, and I wondered what well he drew from that made him so lively.

Today we are invited to reflect upon where we find living waters, and how the springs of eternal life often spring up in surprising places. The Is realities, as they wandered around in the wilderness for years, always searching for somewhere to call home, did not expect to find water in the barren desert. Understandably they complained to their tour guide Moses about where they were going, about when the end would be in sight. Sometimes we can wander for a long time if we think that our home is somewhere else, sometime in the future when everything is going to be so much better.

Even Moses fell prey to that kind of thinking. When he took burden of his people's complaining to God who wondered 'where will it all end? Will we ever get there? Are we lost? Have we been forsaken?

God very quickly reminded Moses that God was indeed with them, and would stand before him when Moses struck the rock which would pour forth water – water for their physical survival. But Moses remember the experience as a spiritual journey, where fear of abandonment was met face to face by the presence of God. God would provide for their journey everyday – they simply had to have faith.

The wonderful story of the woman at the well in John's gospel also plays with this interplay between physical need, the literal need for survival, and spiritual need. Again, water is the physical earthly substance which provides the metaphor for a deeper encounter with God which will provide sustenance for the journey. This time though, there is a bit of a reversal, for Jesus

asks the woman for a drink of water. He has chosen to come to this well in Samaria, foreign territory, and rests awhile at high noon by Jacob's well, long known by John's Jewish listeners that this is a place where intimate encounters between men and women have occurred – usually leading to marriage, but in this case will lead to a marriage of sorts - discipleship.

Needless to say, the woman who comes alone at high noon is surprised that he, a Jew is talking with her, a woman, a Samaritan woman, and a woman obviously shunned by the other village women. In the ancient culture women had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially not by holy men, who did not speak to their own wives in public. I've learned that one group of pious men was known as 'the bruised and bleeding Pharisees; because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses!

She chats with him about the well and how he plans to get this 'living water' he speaks of. Yet Jesus persists in conversation, hoping she will understand about the living water gushing up to eternal life that he wants to offer her. What, I wonder, did Jesus want her to discover, and why did he care so much about this pagan, half- breed, woman, who was one of the town's sinners? Did he want her to experience self-acceptance? To learn of her true value in God's eyes? True friendship, especially to experience the true friendship of a man? The fact that he engaged with her in the longest recorded conversation found in the gospel anywhere, did he want her to find her own theological voice? To discover for herself the truth of God for her life?

If Jesus were to offer each one of the living water that would bubble up in your life, quenching your spirits with the waters of eternity, what would that be? A greater sense of self-esteem? Knowing your own worth and place in the world? Forgiveness? Someone to share the burden of your grief? A ray of light in the darkness of depression? Clarity of purpose where there is confusion? Friendship with God ? Someone to share in the intimacy of your life? Courage to face the burdens and fears of each day? Healing where your spirits are frayed and raw, where your heart is tender?

God knows what your need is - emotionally, physically, spiritually. Jesus stood before the woman in the bright clarity of a noon day sun and named her truth – that she was a woman who had known the disappointments of losing five husbands and now lived with one with whom she was not married – enough said.

Perhaps she was uncomfortable to have her truth named and so she intellectualizes the conversation, discussing theological differences between Samaritans and Jews. Jesus keeps the focus as a deeply intimate human encounter where truth is revealed, and so he reveals his own personal truth- He is the Christ, the Messiah of God. "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." The great "I am" meets this lone woman in the heat of the day – no revelation in the half light of a shadowy total eclipse, but this is an encounter to be experienced in the broad daylight. Jesus is the one who offers living water.

I'm sure that he took her breathe away so at first she did not know how to respond. Found out, yet accepted. Ashamed, yet honoured. Marginalized in the community, yet welcomed. Literalist in her thinking, but encouraged to think more deeply. Jesus had found her, but now she had found God. Could he be the Messiah? Wow! That was a question to share and off she went to speak to the very people who had rejected her. She was the first evangelist.

Anyone who has experienced an encounter with Jesus Christ, who has found the source of living waters in your searching, in your journey, knows how hard it is to share that truth, that story. It may have been on a mountaintop somewhere, or in a church somewhere, or in a dark wood, or a barren desert, in a classroom, or in a counselor's office, in a marriage, or through a divorce – the place nor the time really matters – what matters is the intimate encounter where we know that we

have been met God, our Creator, our Saviour, face to face, truth facing truth and we are accepted, valued, forgiven, and loved as much as we were from the moment our birth pushed us forward on the waters of life carrying us, perhaps crying into the marvelous, sometimes scary adventure we call life.

Do you have a story to tell? Don't waste time trying to find the right words, waiting for approval, for you might very well have the eternal life to offer to another person that can save a life.

Prayers of the People

Chorus: Lo, I am with you 'til the end of the world.

It is a lonely place sitting on the edge,
and there I was on the edge of the well,
not daring to look at him,
but watching his reflection.
He was looking at me.
I knew I shouldn't have, but I turned to look at him.
He quickly looked away to stare at the water in the well,
and scooped some of it up as if playing with it, letting it run through his fingers.
Without looking at me he spoke,
"You'll always be thirsty, you know."
Of course I knew,
but I also knew he wasn't talking about water.
He was talking about love.

O God, quench the thirst of those who long to be included,
to be part of a family, to be loved,
those who sit on the edge, for there is nowhere else to sit.
May they sit here,
and may we be found with them.

Chorus: Lo, I am with you 'til the end of the world.

It is a lonely place being on the edge,
and there I was on the margins of the community-
the despised gender of a despised peoples.
Yet he just sat there.
He made a point of noticing me and at first I imagined it was some dare or some service he required.
I couldn't work it out at first but the longer he sat there the easier it became and I enjoyed his presence.
It was as still as the surface water at the well.
My soul was calmed
my faith grew by the edge of the water.

O God, touch the voice within us that has been silenced;
voices of justice and inclusion,
voices of love extending into the margins.
Sit with us and empower us
to be your strong witnesses in this world.

Chorus: Lo, I am with you 'til the end of the world.

it is a lonely place sitting on the edge,
and there I was on the edge of life,
and the stranger knew how much on the edge I sat.
He knew me well - a prophet!
And we conversed and spoke of religion, and faith and ancestors
and I was longing for the Messiah.
He said, "I am he."
Now I knew too much.

God, when we long for the Messiah,
may we find you in the faces of strangers
and in the least expected places.
Give us the courage to search
in the dark places of our lives
and in the unknown places beyond ourselves
where we will hear you,
"Here I am, the One you are longing for."

Chorus: Lo, I am with you 'til the end of the world.

The Lord's Prayer