

Earth Tones: The Landscape of Lent: Water

Sermon by Rev. Jana Purkis-Brash at Princeton United Methodist Church on Sunday, March 23, 2014 (Scripture John 4:5-42).

Water, it is life giving. Scientists tell us that the earth is made up of 326 million trillion gallons of water. (That's 326 with 18 zeros after it!) Of that amount, 98% is in the oceans and unfit for human consumption unless desalinated. That means that 2% is fresh water. But 1.6% of that fresh water is frozen in the polar ice caps and in glaciers. Another .36% is in underground aquifers and wells, and just .036% in lakes and rivers. When it comes to the human body, we are 65% water. Nutritionists tell us that we should drink at least eight glasses of water a day. Staying hydrated helps with digestion, weight control, and even the reduction of wrinkles in our faces. I once asked a trainer at the gym the secret to having six pack abs, and he said that in addition to the standard exercises you have to drink a lot of water.

Here we find the longest recorded conversation that any of the gospel writers remember Jesus having with a particular individual. It shouldn't surprise us so much that that conversation was not with another rabbi, not with a member of his family, not with one of his disciples, not with a fellow Jew, and not even with a man. This was a conversation with a Samaritan woman of questionable reputation, which was in itself a violation of several social norms of the day. But then Jesus was always doing those kinds of things, which is why we shouldn't be surprised.

To help us understand what is happening here, I suggest we consider four words all starting with the letter "W": well, woman, water and witness.

Wells were (and still are) life for people trying to live in the wilderness and desert areas of the Middle East. The image of water is what is behind the Hebrew's promised hope of "a land flowing with milk and honey." To have milk in a land presupposes cattle, and you cannot have cattle unless you have grass on which they can graze, and you cannot have grass unless you have water. Similarly, if your land is going to flow with honey, you must have bees, and in order to have bees making honey, you must have flowers, and in order to have flowers, you must have water. For a refugee people living in a dry and dusty land, the promise of a land with water seemed like the promise of paradise.

But the places where clean, drinkable water was available, especially in central and

southern areas was limited, and people depended on wells, many of which were claimed to have been dug or bought hundreds of years before by some of the great heroes of their history. The well in this story was located in Samaria, an area considered "off limits" for good, law-abiding Jews. The Pharisees considered it so undesirable that if travel forced you to pass through Samaria, you were required to stop at the border of Israel and pound the nasty Samaritan dust off of your sandals before continuing into the land. Most people took a long detour around Samaria when traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem. But, of course, not Jesus.

Today a Greek Orthodox monastery stands over the site of Jacob's well near the town of Nablus. In the crypt of the monastery is the simple stone well that Jacob bought 4000 years ago for 100 pieces of silver. It is 130 feet deep and clear, cold water can still be drawn from it. 2000 years ago, a weary Jesus sent his disciples into the town to find some food for lunch, and sat down by himself at the well.

A Samaritan woman comes to the well. It is no surprise that a woman comes to the well. That was women's work in the day anyway. The oddity was the time of her visit.

Women didn't go to wells in midday when the sun was high overhead and the heat was oppressive. Women went to the well early in the morning. And they used the daily meeting as a time for sharing. Wells were the Starbucks of the day. There would have been plenty of gossip at wells. The fact that this woman comes to the well at noon tells us something. Of course it may simply have been that she was delayed on this particular day, but the conversation she has with Jesus suggests another reason. Either she wasn't welcome to come early with the other women or she is intentionally avoiding them. She has had five husbands and is currently living with a guy whom she has not married. That would be good gossip fodder for Starbucks today, in a time when a whole lot of anything goes. Imagine what that living situation would have meant in that time! This woman was probably an outcast in her own town. So she came to the well alone.

The conversation about water takes place on two levels. As was the case with Nicodemus last week, who heard Jesus' talk about being born anew only on the level of physical birth, the Samaritan woman thinks Jesus is talking about H₂O. "Living water" had a particular meaning in that culture. Living water was moving water, like the water of a river or stream. As such, it was more desirable than still water. Wells, if left uncovered, could contain dead animals that had fallen in,

buckets whose ropes had broken, and any manner of assorted debris. Living water ran clear and clean, and was significantly more desirable. If you had a choice to get living water rather than well water, you would jump at the chance.

Because Jesus asked for her to get him a drink from the well and then said that he had living water, she was confused. How was he able to get water when he didn't have anything to draw it with? He told her that the water he could give her would take away her thirst forever and that the "well" itself would be located within her. It would bubble up with living water for eternal life. Missing the point, she asked for that gift of water so she wouldn't be thirsty again or have to come back to the well and haul up buckets of water.

Remember, water is life, physical life. Living water is the best water. Jesus is telling her about the living water, the best water of spiritual life, but she doesn't get that clearly until Jesus tells her who he is.

In the passage there are three witnesses:

- Jesus makes a witness to the woman of who he is.
- The woman makes a witness to the town of who Jesus is.
- John, the writer, makes a witness to us of the nature of God and who we ought to be.

When Jesus starts to talk about her personal life, the woman immediately changes the subject to a question about where God really wanted people to worship. Jesus continues to cross the arbitrary boundaries of race, gender, social norms, and now religious law to state that God cares most of all about what happens in the heart--in the spirit. She responds by saying that when he comes the Messiah will explain all of this. And Jesus says, "I am he." The first witness is the one Jesus makes about his own true identity.

The second witness is the one the woman makes to the people in her town. To her credit she doesn't get into a big theological explanation about what happened to her at the well. She says in effect, "You know what a mess I have made of my life. But I met this man who has given me hope and a promise of something eternal that will never dry up. Come and see him." The strongest witness you can ever make is the one that starts with the word, "I." Hear the difference: "Let me tell you about this guy who once was sure he met Jesus..." And..."I want to tell you about

the day I met Jesus..." Big difference.

But the most powerful witness here, I believe, is the one John, the Gospel author, makes about the nature of God revealed in Jesus and the implications that nature has for those who claim to follow Jesus and seek to live into his will.

Conventional accepted behaviors (and ritual laws) for "good Jews" stated:

- No traveling in Samaria. //Jesus did that.
- No eating in Samaria. //Jesus did that.
- No contact with Samaritans. //Jesus did that.
- No conversations between unaccompanied women and men. //Jesus did that.
- No worshipping anyplace but in the Temple in Jerusalem. //Jesus denied that.

Over and over again Jesus defied the rigid boundaries imposed by the religious and social leaders of his time. You can look at some of what he did in a contemporary context, and some of it will bother you and maybe even make you angry, as it did the Pharisees and Sadducees.

If Jesus were physically present today,

- He would visit the Ukraine.
- He would have dinner with prostitutes and drug addicts.
- He would surround himself with people of poverty.
- He would embrace and the Gay, Lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community.
- He would call on us to pray for terrorists.

Jesus is alive today. And we are his body. We are his presence. We are called to have his mind, and to act as best we are able to discern as Jesus would. To ask and take seriously the question of what would Jesus do in our time moves us well beyond the wristbands that were popular years ago and into the often uncomfortable and sometimes socially unacceptable places where we acknowledge that all people of all nations, all cultures, all religions, all genders, all ages, all races, all sexual orientations, all incomes, all accomplishments and all sins are God's own children and our sisters and brothers seeking the water of eternal

life.

And that, my dear friends in Christ, is the most significant witness of all... the one **you** make. Drink deeply of the living water that Christ offers and share that life giving water with others who need it so badly.