

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, March 12, 2023

3 Lent, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

[Exodus 17:1-7](#)

[Psalm 95](#)

[Romans 5:1-11](#)

[John 4:5-42](#)

As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so our souls long for you, O God.

+ + +

Do you remember a time when you were really thirsty?

Not just when you felt the urge to wet your whistle, but when there was no water around and all you could think of was your deep need for it?

I've never been in danger from thirst, but I remember a time once hiking with Julia on Mount Rose at Lake Tahoe, an eleven-mile round trip at eight thousand feet of elevation, when we dramatically underestimated how much water we'd need and ran out before the halfway point. A kind soul we met along the way eventually gave us some from their water bottle and we made it down without incident, but it was a sobering experience to feel that dry and not know whether we'd be able to get more water or not for several miles.

There are places where water is so abundant that it might seem like it's always available. When I first visited Portland, Oregon, I was amazed to see that city's famous downtown drinking fountains that are always on. They call them Benson Bubblers after the person who donated them, and they just bubble all day and night. It's the same in Rome, Italy, where the fountains are called "nasoni," or big noses, because of the shape of their spouts. I guess when you're in the lush Pacific Northwest, or when you have massive aqueducts built by the ancient Romans, water is abundant enough to feel like an almost infinite resource. It's different here in California, of course, this winter notwithstanding. Even as this dramatic wet season refills our snowpack and reservoirs we have a consciousness that this is an arid state and that water is something to be conserved, sometimes even rationed.

It's that way in much of the world. In many places women and girls are the ones designated to collect water. The nearest well may be miles away from home. It's been estimated that in some places women spend over a quarter of the hours of their lives collecting water. And of course this is what the Samaritan woman is doing when she encounters Jesus in today's gospel.

Noon: the heat of the day, when no one else is around the well—could mean unpopular/scandalous past—but we don't know that.

5x married could be unwilling divorces, or deaths (esp. in a society with levirate marriage). One she lives with might be an unmarried partner, but could also be a son, brother, or male relative.

So instead of falling into the temptation so many commentators have over the centuries to label her as some sort of “loose woman” whose primary identity is “sinner,” maybe better to stick to the text itself without reading too many presuppositions into it.

One thing the text tells us is that Jesus is thirsty, and the woman has water. But in another sense, the woman is thirsty and Jesus has living water.

Don't know exactly what she's thirsty for. Could be forgiveness of sin. Could be religious devotion, as evidenced by her keen curiosity about the right way to worship. Could be to be treated as an equal, as happens in the delicious wordplay in the extended conversation between her and Jesus. Could be simply to be seen and known, rather than looked past or looked through—as she receives from Jesus, who tells her own story in a way she can recognize.

For any and all of these things, she finds her thirst quenched by what Jesus has to offer.

What are you thirsty today?

All of us thirst for many things:

Basic physical needs

Acceptance

Home

Excitement

Loved ones

Pleasure

Status

Safety

Peace

We sometimes quench our thirsts in healthy ways and sometimes in unhealthy ways.

Thirsts can lead us into addictive behavior: alcohol, sex, shopping, drugs, media, self-isolation ... might be the equivalent of reaching for a sugary soda at the top of Mt. Rose.

Thirsts can lead us to do healthy things like create meaningful relationships, build flourishing households, do satisfying work ... like drinking cold nourishing water.

But known or unknown, our deepest thirst is for the living water Jesus offers, the water he describes as gushing up from our innermost selves into a never-ending fountain. Our deepest thirst is for the living God, as the psalmist expresses in verses I read at the outset. As St. Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in You.”

In just under four weeks, we will be assembled together again, not on a Sunday morning, but in the darkness of the evening of Good Friday.

We'll hear the passion story from John's gospel.

I want to share with you two verses just a few lines apart.

John is the only gospel to report Jesus saying from the cross: "I am thirsty."

So in John we see a Jesus who knows what it is to be a human being who thirsts.

In embracing the full extent of humanity, with our weakness and our suffering,

Jesus experiences our human thirst: for water, and for everything else.

And: only in John's gospel, after Jesus has died, a soldier pierces his side and blood and water flow from Jesus' side. Christians throughout the ages have seen this as a reference to the Eucharist and Baptism. And rightly so, because it's truly through the paschal mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection that we receive the living water, flowing from the heart of Jesus himself and into our own thirsty spirits. The same one who knows what it is to thirst, is also the one who is able to quench our thirst, both now and into eternity.

This Lent, and this Easter, may we come to the fountain of living water, drink deeply and well, and ourselves become fountains that overflow with this same water, that the whole world may drink.

Amen.