

Sermon 3 Lent Year A  
February 24, 2008rt  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
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### In Search of Living Water

*Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar . . . and tired out by his journey, was sitting by the side of the well. A Samaritan woman came to draw water and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water . . . Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.* John 4:5-42

There are two essential things to know about Jesus that the story of his encounter with the woman of Samaria beautifully illustrates. First, for Jesus, the boundaries that we use to distinguish ourselves from one another do not exist. Second, he is about *living water*, a hauntingly beautiful phrase to describe those things that deeply satisfy the human soul.

There were more reasons that we can count for Jesus not to speak with the Samaritan woman at the well, all wrapped up in the social, religious, and political conventions of his day. She was a woman; men didn't speak to women in public. She was a Samaritan; Jews hated Samaritans. She was a sinner, an outcast in her own community, as suggested by her presence alone at a communal well; rabbis were not to associate with the spiritually unclean. Jesus ignored every boundary between them and engaged her as a person capable of understanding profound mystery and, when confronted with truth, of changing her life. To the extent that Jesus' behavior reflects the desire of God, we do well to consider the boundaries we keep around ourselves in relationship to others. While they are real to us and for us, in God's eyes, *they don't exist*. "In God's family," writes Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "there are no outsiders. All are insiders."<sup>1</sup> That truth meant for Tutu that during the grinding years of struggle against apartheid, he had to treat the President of South Africa as a brother, and to pray daily for him.

Prejudice is the great boundary keeper between us. Ignorance and fear are close behind. Anger and hurt are powerful as well. It's tempting to look with disdain on other people's prejudices, ignorance, and fear, while rationalizing our own. We feel justified in erecting walls of protection when we are angry or hurt. Maybe we are justified sometimes. But with Jesus as our guide, it's clear that God doesn't go where we go when powerful emotions overtake us and define how we relate to one another.

In a small book of daily meditations for the season of Lent, Barbara Cawthorne Crafton reflects on the power that anger has to color her perceptions of other people. Cleaning her desk, she discovered a sheet of paper on which she had written "Don't React!" over twenty times in response to a person who had triggered her anger. She pondered God's relationship to the same person. "Is the person before me only a child of God when he is being sweet and generous? No—he's a child of God all the time. Does

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu, *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 20.

God love him only when he is good? No—God simply loves him.”<sup>2</sup> Somewhere within the person with whom I am so angry I can barely speak, or who has hurt me, or who has done things that I find abhorrent, or who stands for things that I cannot condone, somewhere within that person is the image of God. That’s what Jesus sees and he invites us to see it, too.

The second thing to know about Jesus as we encounter him today is his passion for living water. The prophet Isaiah had a similar passion: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor that that which does not satisfy?” (Isaiah 55:1-2)

Living water is a name for what nourishes us in the deepest places. It can be anything or anyone. It can be the person who knows you, who can see through to the core of your being, as Jesus saw the Samaritan woman, and loves you there. It can be the endeavors that satisfy you, no matter the cost of time or energy.

If you can readily identify a person, place, or involvement that is your living water, your soul’s sustenance, then you are indeed blessed. Make sure that you cherish your living water for the gift that it is, something priceless God has given you. Put aside your worries if the pursuit of living water seems costly or selfish, because for you it is a holy endeavor. And don’t fret for a moment if your living water isn’t explicitly spiritual, whatever that means, as if God, the Creator of all life and goodness, somehow divided the world into gradations of holiness.

My mother, somewhere around her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, took up ballroom dancing. For over six years she taken classes and private lessons at a little dance studio about thirty miles from her house. She regularly competes in dance competitions, and she almost always wins. (“There isn’t much competition in the over-70 category,” she’ll modestly confess.) She buys beautiful clothes for these competitions, which are held all over the country. Whenever she tells me about her dancing, she hesitates at first, saying how silly she feels as the 70+ single woman on the dance floor with instructors half her age, and how guilty to be spending the considerable money all this costs. But invariably delight takes over—for she *really* loves to dance. Once she told me of a time when her instructor swung her high in the air, and she felt as if she were 20 again. That, my friends, is living water.

Where do we go to find living water when we’re in need of it? Where do we look if we don’t know what we’re looking for? And what happens when the wells that once sustained us no longer do and we need to search our new ones?

The author and poet David Whyte writes of a time in his life of when he was busy, competent, productive, and *fast*. “Speed was my essence and, I thought, my true savior in solving the difficulties of commitment and the increasing burden of detail.” He realized in retrospect that speed, for all its rewards, was also a warning, “a throbbing indicator that we are living someone else’s life and doing someone else’s work.”

By the providence of a friendship with an old monk who loved poetry as much as he did, he had a life-changing conversation which began, as conversations always did with this monk, with the reading of a poem. The poem this time was one by Rainer Maria Rilke entitled, “The Awkward Way the Swan Walks.”

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, *Living Lent: Meditations for These Forty Days* (Harrisburg: Moorehouse Publishing, 1998), 38.

*This clumsy living that moves lumbering  
as if in ropes through what is not done,  
reminds us of the awkward way the swan walks.  
And to die, which is the letting go  
of the ground we stand on and cling to every day,  
is like the swan, when he nervously lets himself down  
into the water, which receives him gaily  
and which flows under  
and after him, wave after wave,  
while the swan, unmoving and marvelously calm,  
is pleased to be carried, each movement more fully grown,  
more like a king, further and further on.*<sup>3</sup>

“Brother David,” Whyte asked after a time of silence, “Tell me about exhaustion.” Brother David replied, “You know, the antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest. The antidote to exhaustion is *wholeheartedness*.”

He went on: “You are tired through and through because . . . you are only half here, and half here will kill you after awhile. . . . You are like Rilke’s swan in his awkward waddling across the ground. The swan doesn’t cure his awkwardness by beating himself on the back, by moving faster, or by trying to organize himself better. He does it by moving toward the elemental water, where he belongs. It is the simple contact with the water that gives him grace and presence. You only have to touch the elemental waters in your own life, and it will transform everything. But you have to let yourself down into those waters from the ground on which you stand, and that can be hard. Particularly if you think you might drown.”<sup>4</sup>

Whyte was one of the fortunate ones, for he knew what his elemental waters were. Not all of us do. But he also knew that choosing those waters would cost him dearly. Choosing living water is never the easy path. It will cost us, for we must, in Rilke’s words, first let go of the ground we’re cling to and let ourselves down. We will resist this at first, in part because we have become accustomed to the ground and have adapted to it. We resist because our thirst for living water resides beneath other thirsts that are more readily satisfied. If we choose or feel compelled by our life’s circumstances to spend the best part of us satiating lesser thirsts, clinging to the ground of stability they afford us, it will be that much harder to recognize the more elusive, deeper thirsts for what they are.

What does it mean to be thirsty when we can walk through enormous supermarket rows of varying soft drinks, and we carry our water bottles and coffee mugs with us everywhere? Where do we seek our soul’s nourishment in a culture of perpetual entertainment, when we can carry our screens with us in our pockets? It’s a drought of another kind, you know, this over-feeding of our appetites and bombardment of our senses. Perhaps God has no choice but to allow us to learn through experience the limitation of superficial satisfactions before we can feel our soul’s deeper thirst. Perhaps before we can take let ourselves down into living water, we must acknowledge the exhaustion of being half present to our lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Awkward Way a Swan Walks,” quoted by David Whyte in *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), 131.

<sup>4</sup> White, 132-33.

Or perhaps something will happen to force us into the depths of living water, because we have choice. Tragedy is all around, and we are all touched by it at one time or another. Tragedy will plunge us into those depths faster than anything. But when that happens, there is a danger that we might, in fact, drown in them. In those waters, we need others to throw us a lifeline, help us to stay afloat and to breathe.

In the last week alone, citizens of our city and our state have endured the senseless killing of children, and they have been compelled to grieve publically, as the rest of us look on in horror. There is no way for a human being to face such loss and live to speak of it without knowing something about living water. But the only way for those in the throes of grief to experience the water around them as life-giving is when others choose to enter the water with them. Then the waters are waters of consolation that sustains when we can't sustain ourselves; the waters of grace, giving us permission to grieve; the waters of community, that calls forth a compassionate response from strangers. And blessed are we when we choose to plunge in, defying all the boundaries that would keep us safely on shore, to offer whatever connection to living water we have, as a lifeline for someone else.

In closing, let me underscore Jesus' questions to us all: Where is your living water? If you don't know, who might be your Brother David, someone to help you discover and claim that water? If you do know where your living water is, how can you let yourself down and allow its grace to carry you? Do you have some living water to share with one who needs it as much or more as you do? How many boundaries might you cross in order to give some of your living water away? And might you discover new waters for you there?