

Encounter at the well

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2017

...knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...Romans 5:3-4

The Israelites are weary and discouraged, but Moses never loses hope. In their long journey toward the Promised Land, they are in disarray and are wondering if God has given up on them. They are thirsty and in search of water. When Moses looks for a source of drinking water, he takes his staff and strikes a rock and immediately water gushes out from it. In their discouragement they had forgotten that God had been with them all along and are reassured that they will reach their destination in the land of promise.

This scene of water flowing from the rock prefigures the rite of baptism. Civilizations have always centered on the availability of water as a source of life. Water plays a significant part in our salvation history and is the centerpiece the gospel story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. There are a number of significant points in this story. First of all, Jews and Samaritans had not been on speaking terms for many years. An invisible wall that separated Samaritans from the rest of Palestine compelled them to go out of their way to avoid each other. When traveling north from Jerusalem to Galilee, the Jewish people would cross over the east side of the Jordan to go around Samaria before crossing back over into Galilee. In returning to Galilee, Jesus ignores the traditional enmity between his people and the Samaritans and takes the shorter route home straight up through Samaria.

It is the middle of a very warm day when Jesus arrives in the Samaritan town of Sychar and stops at the village water source known as Jacob's well. It is a popular gathering place for people to rest and visit. Since he has no bucket with which to draw the water, Jesus asks the unnamed Samaritan woman for a cup of cold water. She is perplexed because she knows that a Jewish rabbi is forbidden to speak to women in public, especially a Samaritan woman. Jesus ignores both the prohibition against contact with Samaritans and speaking to a woman in public. The old prohibitions didn't make sense. Why should he not speak to her? After all, he is building bridges, not walls.

The Samaritan woman has no idea who he is. He tells her that her thirst will be satisfied with this water for only a while, but he can offer her living water. It is soon apparent that their conversation is on different levels. She is being literal; he is speaking in metaphor. She is talking about ordinary water from a well while the water to which he refers is from God. This longest recorded dialogue of Jesus is typical of many of his conversations that lead from immediate material needs to ultimate spiritual needs. Material needs are temporary; having a right relationship with God is eternal.

When Jesus asks the Samaritan woman about her husband, he knows that she has been through five husbands and is not married to the man she has now. We don't know if her husbands divorced her or if she was widowed or if she left them. It doesn't take long for him to discern that she is searching for something. Because of her multiple relationships she is despised by her own people. She is so impressed with how much Jesus knows about her and perceives him to be a prophet. She is so struck with his insight that she does what we may do when faced with intimate questions and our private world is invaded. She abruptly changes the subject. When backed into a corner she avoids being confronted with the truth. When he asks about the right place to worship Jesus tells her that it is not where but whom we worship. The time has come when true worshipers will worship God in spirit and in truth. Moreover, God cannot be contained in a building, no matter how beautiful and inspiring it may be. As the people of God, we can gather for worship anywhere at any time with anyone. The dynamic power of God is not bound by the limits of our understanding.

When the woman declares that the long awaited Messiah will explain everything to them, one of the most dramatic moments in the Bible occurs when Jesus reveals that the one to whom she is speaking is the Messiah. Imagine her astonishment! She leaves her water jar at the well and goes quickly into the city to tell everyone what she has seen and heard. Some believe her testimony while others have to see for themselves. The Samaritan woman asks the question that we all ask: Is Jesus really the Messiah, the anointed one of God? It is in a personal encounter with him that we see, hear, and believe that God is truly with us in the person of Christ Jesus.

The water in the rock of Moses and the water in the well of Jacob is the living water of God. After we are born into the world, we were born anew into Christ. The living water of baptism sits placidly until we are immersed in it. Only when water is stirred up does anything happen. Life is all about stirring up the Spirit of God. Nothing happens when we indulge in complacency. When water is allowed to become stagnant it cannot support life. We make progress only when the living water is stirred up to energize us to new life. God has a way of arousing us from our complacency and stagnation to an awareness of what it means to be alive in Christ.

Come, see, and believe. See the breadth, length, depth, and height of how God's love works in you. See how God's love in Christ bridges the barriers that separate us. Know the lengths to which Christ goes in giving himself for us. Believe the depths to which you can get to know who you are and how much you are loved. Feel the height to which Christ's spirit lifts you up when you allow God's grace to work in you.

Go ahead and ask the questions. Is Christ real to you? How is he working in your life right now? Is there a challenge that God might be offering you? You have to ask the questions to learn the answers. No one can do it for you. Only you can arrive at the conclusions for yourself.