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Alexandria, VA 22310
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Exodus 7:1–17
John 4:5–42

A WELL, A CUP OF WATER, AND A WITNESS

John, Chapter 4, verses 5 to 42—it may be a record for one of the longest lections that we read. That could be why the lectionary in days past would chop the reading off at verse 26. Midway through the story it would stop. But despite our loss of attention spans, we break with this failed tradition of only reading part of the story. And today we share it in its entirety. Thanks be to God for your participation.

If you want, we'll do a little test now so take your Bible if you still are holding them and put your finger in them and close them up. Now open the book at this point, OK? Just see what we can remember.

Jesus is on his way through Samaria, right? He had to go through Samaria, verse 4 says. And he stops, tired, by a well. Wells have a rich tradition in Old Testament readings. Wells are places of rebirth—places of the birth of love. People came to wells in the Old Testament, and they often were enthralled with who they met there. Isaac met Rebecca there. Jacob meets Rachel at a well. Even Moses meets his wife, Sophora, at a well. And so when Jesus arrived at the well, lo and behold, a woman is there also. Now Jesus is the bridegroom for the New Testament, and the church, the people, the sheep are all the bride. So this woman represents more than just someone coming to the well to retrieve water. She represents all who will receive the message of Jesus Christ, Savior of the world.

I love the way Christ's request for a drink of water is met with a kind of tongue in cheek comment. "You've come to a well without a cup? And you expect to drink? And why are you talking to me, anyway," she says. "I am a lowly Samaritan, a woman." Jesus is undaunted. In fact, this interplay between Jesus and the woman at the well is one of the few times that there is a dialogue. Every other time Jesus encounters someone, it turns into a monologue. Remember what happened with Nicodemus? One or two exchanges and then Jesus carries on the conversation without him. More often than not that's the circumstance we find in John. But not today. This woman holds her own. Misguided and just as bewildered as we would be, she offers the best understanding she has. It is much deeper than most people give her credit for offering.

When Jesus asked for a cup of water, the conversation seems to almost immediately go into a theological question about where to worship. Whose rules are better than someone else's? Who's really an ancestor who can claim Jacob as their forefather? Jesus responds with an invitation. The same way when we ask the wrong questions, Christ guides us out of bad theology into good.

Let's talk about your need—your thirst—rather than where you are to worship. Let's talk about God's spirit which builds up rather than tears down. Let's talk about the common thirst that we share. What's really bothering you. What's really at the essence of your question? It's a gut check for sure. And as soon as all the veneer is peeled back and we're at the heart of the issue, this woman, just as we would, has to confess, "Are you the Messiah—the one I've waited for?"

Remember the story of Moses standing in front of the burning bush? He's told to take his sandals off for he's standing on holy ground. And Moses, like this woman, kind of argues with God a little about what God's got planned. "And who am I to tell them has sent me?" Moses asked, as if to put God on his heels. Remember God's response to Moses? "Tell them *I am* has sent you." Who does Jesus say he is? "I am He. "I am the one you've been waiting for that you want to understand more about. I am the Christ, the Messiah.

About this time, the disciples return from their food and run into town. And notice what happens with them. You're tempted to open your Bibles, aren't you, and look back. They have questions, just like this woman, but they aren't willing to ask them. They are afraid to be as honest as she is. The woman goes back to town. Yes, her faith is tentative—it is immature. She proclaims the gospel with a question mark, but remember how she left her water jar at the well? She had every intention of coming back for her water jar, trust me. She had every intention of coming back and sharing more of that renewal that she had felt in talking with Christ.

But the disciples are still clueless. Still dumbfounded about what's taking place in this strange land with these people they don't like—and with, of all things, a woman. Can't you just picture Jesus trying to teach his disciples as all of the people are coming out of the village. It's as if he says, "Turn around and look behind you. The whole world is here ready to receive the message." Interesting that this woman, who is one of the first Jesus picks to share the gospel, also has one of the greatest success stories short of Pentecost. More people come to believe that day. And what happens next. What have we been preaching here at Bush Hill for months, if not years? What happens next after the town comes out, and they, in fact, give witness to what the woman has said—that they, too, are thirsty, and Christ fills them.

They stay and share hospitality. It says Jesus stays two days with these foreigners, and they share community. They get to know one another. John Bell was preaching recently at the Presbytery meeting. He's a name from my past 26 years ago. John Bell (we were studying in Scotland) was a young minister at that time. He's gotten older now. and he recently shared a sermon in which he said something that really took me back. He said, "God will not give worship to people who will not know each other—who will not dare to enter into community." This message is as much about what we do here as a congregation as it is about Jesus affirming this woman's belief. I wonder if we could take away all of the extraneous interpretations and recognize that John is talking about the difference of being in the light of Christ and being in the darkness of Nicodemus, which we read about in the chapter before this.

It's not enough to have questions. At some point, we have to question ourselves and say, "Could this really be where Jesus is leading me? Could this be God's voice asking me to step out in faith? Could this be the community where I need to practice hospitality as never before, so then I could truly worship in spirit and in truth?"

I think this woman has something to say to us because I believe Jesus still speaks through her, with her, in our hearts. Would that we would drink when we are thirsty, a gushing stream of water from our Savior. Take a moment and ask yourself. Where have you been heading in the wrong direction? Where have the questions become meaningless? Where is God asking us to go together as his community of faith?

Let us share now in Christ's invitation.