

Go to the well

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95, Rom 5:1-11, John 4:5-52

Many of us have heard about the Haj, the sacred pilgrimage that all Muslims are required to do at least once in their life. Muslims travel to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and process around the Kaaba, the most sacred site in Islam. Muslims believe Abraham and Ishmael built the Kaaba around 2000 BC when Ishmael settled in Arabia. However most of us have probably not heard about another Islamic sacred site only 20 metres from the Kaaba. It is the zamzam well. According to Islamic belief it was a miraculously generated source of water from God when Ishmael, then a small child was thirsty and kept crying for water. As he was kicking at the ground water gushed out. The zamzam well has apparently never run out and millions of Muslim pilgrims drink its waters each year. The Saudi government no longer allows zamzam water to be taken out of the country but still millions of litres of fake water are sold in the Muslim world. It makes you think about the power of sacred water and the power of just plain water. Reading about the zamzam well made me think of many things; the similarities between the three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—and their differences; it makes me think of the centrality of water in all religions as a symbol and metaphor for life.

Water is indeed life. Without water things that are alive become parched and shriveled. Sometimes on the beach nearby where David and I are building our house there will be masses of seaweed washed up on the shore. If the next tide does not take it away within a few days what once had been full and lush, for seaweed, becomes dried out and brittle. Without water we die. We can live for quite a long time without food but only a few days without water. Thirst, the need for water can become all-consuming and without water we become delirious and disorientated. I would suggest that water is the most precious commodity on earth. In our affluent culture we are somewhat disconnected from the preciousness of water and can take it for granted, particularly in the cities. (Philippines)

In our Gospel story water is central. There is a well in this story—Jacob's well. It was and is believed that Jacob (who had the 12 sons) camped outside the city of Shechem and purchased the land on which the well is sited. Hundreds of years later Jesus comes to this well and begins a conversation with a Samaritan woman who has come to fetch water.

Did you know that Jesus talks longer to the woman at the well than he does to anyone else in all the Gospels? —longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his accusers, longer than he talks to any of his own family. She is the first person he reveals himself to in the Gospel of John. She is the first outsider to guess who he is and tell others. She is the first evangelist, John tells us, and her testimony brings many to faith. She stands in contrast to Nicodemus who deliberately came at night to be with Jesus. She meets Jesus in a chance encounter in the middle of the day in the sunlight. As you are probably aware this whole encounter was very unusual and very strange.

We know that this is a very unlikely exchange for two reasons—that she is a Samaritan, traditional enemies of the Jews, and she is a woman. A Jewish man did not initiate a conversation with a woman. Moreover a Jewish teacher did not engage in public conversation with a woman. An old saying went, "He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the law and at the last will inherit Gehenna". No wonder Jesus disciples were horrified—by talking to this woman he was neglecting the most

fundamental responsibility of a Jew, the law, and he was on his way to hell. (Girls, you've just got to love Jesus!!)

This whole amazing encounter takes place around a well—the source of water, or life in the desert and it is no mistake that John has this meeting take place at a well. By doing so he evokes biblical memories of Rebecca and Isaac, Rachel and Jacob, Moses and Zipporah—all betrothal and marriage stories. Meeting Jesus then is about meeting a lifelong partner. And it is about a relationship that is life giving and transformative. The encounter with Jesus quenches the deepest thirst, brings life to dry bones and fulfils the deepest longings.

Which brings me to the point of my sermon. To find the same life—giving reality we too must go to the well. Not Jacob's well in Palestine but the well and living water that is Jesus Christ. The whole point of the Christian journey is to get us humans back into relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. The biblical story from Eden to revelation is about this one primary goal but we are not meant to wait until the end of time to get there. We are to be connected to God now, grounded and rooted in his love, in this moment. It is from that place that all our good works and projects, our charity and love flow most naturally and easily.

Eugene Peterson, one of the best known writers on ministry and who also wrote the contemporary translation of the bible, the Message, tells the story of a woman who had grown up in an abusive fundamentalist home, got pregnant, fell apart and ended up on the streets a prostitute and drug addict. One day she wandered into an empty church and somehow became a Christian. She wasn't sure how it happened but she knew it had happened. After some exploring she embraced the Christian way. However what she found difficult were churches. She was welcomed with open arms but what disturbed her was the fact that her new friends were doing the same thing she had done, only not so obviously. The churches were full of people with ideas and projects that were used just like alcohol and drugs—to avoid God, to avoid being present to life, to avoid placing the Lord at the centre of their lives. It seemed to her they were doing everything religious except following Jesus. Thankfully she persevered and did not abandon her new friends. Perhaps her own pain and suffering made her compassionate about the failings of others.

Her story touches me and challenges me. How much of our religious life is about that most important thing—going to the well where we find Jesus? This critical idea of connecting with Christ has been encapsulated in what the planning group and parish council see as our mission in this place. Our mission is *to glorify God and make disciples by connecting the disconnected into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.*

I think our gospel story today is a beautiful window into that mission. It is almost perfect in its ability to uncover all the layers in that mission statement. In his encounter with the Samaritan woman Jesus was very clear and unapologetic. He declared that he was the living water and that this water would become in those who came to him a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. We have the mission we have not because we want to notch up another Christian convert. We have the mission we have because we know that abundant life for all comes from the source that is Jesus Christ. Out of that growing relationship with Christ, that growing into an ever—deepening connection with our Lord comes goodness for all. Its fruits are peace, justice, reconciliation, compassion and love to name just a few. From it comes hope for today and strength for tomorrow.

Perhaps we can think of God as the aquifer, the ground water deep within us, deep within creation. But we spend our time on the surface level, searching for meaning, depth, goodness, love, purpose—searching for that elusive something what will heal our brokenness, satisfy our hunger, gift us with serenity. When we don't find it some of us simply give up and become even more disconnected from our deepest longings, the world around us and

ourselves. Imagine then the water deep within. Jesus is the well that connects us to the aquifer deep within Reality. And just to be Trinitarian, imagine that it is the Spirit of Jesus that is the water—the Holy Spirit, giver of life as our creed puts it. This water brings into our lives and our world what we most deeply crave. When we talk about being connected to Jesus we are talking about this Reality.

I remember clearly during last years lent I prayed about what God was primarily asking of me in ministry at this time. There were many possibilities that came to mind. As part of my prayer I looked at the ordination vows yet again, I gazed at the treetops and clouds and kept praying. Eventually what came to me was this very simple picture—go to Jesus and tell others about him. I must say whenever I have prayed for direction the answers I always end up with have been very simple. It is almost a cut down version of our mission—*to connect the disconnected into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.*

So brothers and sisters—go to the well and drink of that life-giving water, Jesus the Christ. However you understand that, however it makes sense to you. Some find their way to the well through prayer, some through study and thinking, some through experience, some through art and music and some because they finally have no where else to go. Go to that well for Jesus the Christ is the never-ending water in the zamzam well, he is the dharma water in Buddhism, he is the water that gushes from the rock in the Sinai wilderness. He is the eternal, divine, life—giving water. If you do only one thing this Lent find the time and the place to welcome Christ into your life more fully. Do you have a place or a time where you can connect with the Christ in you and in creation? Is it around the communion table? Is it during private prayer? Perhaps it is walking through a forest or along a beach? Would talking to a trusted friend or minister help? All you have to do is make yourself available—the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the water, will do the rest.