

Exodus 17:1-7 ~ John 4:5-30, 39-42  
*Seeking: Will You Give Me a Drink?*<sup>i</sup>  
 Third Sunday in Lent ~ March 12, 2023  
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Scripture Reading:*

Remember those "Highlights" magazines they used to have in the waiting rooms of pediatricians' offices? When I was a child, those magazines had a kind of mystical quality to me because I thought the only place you could ever find them was in a waiting room outside a doctor's office. (Apparently, my mom was happy to let me keep thinking that.) For over seventy-five years now, Highlights magazine has featured on the back cover a drawing called "What's Wrong?" It's a drawing of a typical scene of children playing, but if you look carefully there are things that look obviously wrong or out of place. And the game is to find them all.

The story in John 4 about Jesus and the Samaritan woman could be a "What's Wrong" drawing for a Highlights magazine. This story contains a well of contradictions so deep I am still discovering new angles and insights from a Bible story that I have loved and studied for over thirty years, way back when I first translated it from the Greek while in seminary, learning how to be a pastor. But even at a first glance there appears to be more wrong than right in this story, from the perspective of what was normal and expected.

Here are a few clues about what to look for as I read it to you: That he chose to go through *Samaria* (a region inhabited by a people that all Jews, including Jesus, customarily avoided). That he asked a *Samaritan woman* for a drink, that she came there *at noon by herself*; that the two of them engaged in a long, *truly dialogical conversation*; that she uses Jesus' words "Come and See," and it works! She becomes the first and extremely effective evangelist in John's gospel. And wait, there's more! But the doctor is ready for you now. So let us come to the well of Living Water and take a drink, as I read this sacred story from John 4, beginning at verse 5...

*Sermon:*

What's wrong with this picture here this morning? Making us lose an hour of sleep at 2 AM on a Sunday morning. That seems especially wrong to all of us preacher types. Add to that, multiple inches of snow in March on a Saturday night and Sunday morning, that also seems wrong for those of us hoping to gather for church. (But here we are! And Thank God for livestream, by the way!) But you came here on a snowy day, looking for what's right, yes? We'll get to that. Why rush. We have an eternity, right? Or not.

The way we think about eternity is very contextual. If you are waiting for an ambulance, five minutes can seem like an eternity. If you have been attending FPC and all of a sudden here in Lent, our "Time for Silent Prayer and Meditation" is extended to 90 seconds, that can seem like it will never end. Here in church and in the Bible, you hear about eternity in the context of eternal life. Like Jesus in today's story, offered the woman at the well, "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." For a woman whose life has been fraught with brokenness, loneliness, and stress that just getting through each day was a trial, how could a longer life of heart ache be

good news? In John, the concept of “eternal life” isn’t primarily about quantity or length of life. That is, the number of seconds, minutes, days, years of our lives on earth and in heaven. Eternal life in John primarily refers to *quality* of life. And that can begin whenever, wherever our parched souls are quenched. Of course, the woman at the well didn’t know her story would be told in John, where metaphor and symbol are just about always just beneath the surface. So, at first, she took Jesus words literally. Until they kept talking and listening to one another.

Until she realized this spring of water gushing up to eternal life was good news for her even at that moment. She didn’t even need her water jar, she left it at the well! Yes: this is good news for the woman at the well and for us. We don’t have to wait until we die to experience the eternal life that Jesus is offering the woman in this story. She had a taste of it in this conversation with Jesus.

And so did Jesus. Right there in the noon day heat. Jesus was tired and thirsty. And likely hungry. (Our clue: we are told that the disciples had gone to town to buy food.) We see Jesus in a very human, vulnerable moment. (Especially rare in this gospel.) We won’t hear about him being thirsty again until another noon, on the Friday when he was hanging on the cross (John 19:28). “I am thirsty” are the last words he uttered before he said, “It is finished.” Friends, we have a Savior who got thirsty. From his first forty days in the wilderness to the day he died. We have a God who loved the world enough to experience thirst, hunger, pain, and disdain, firsthand.

In this conversation we see how this mutual vulnerability is key to experiencing eternal life on earth. Even though we don’t know her name. We can feel her pain. Her shame. And in the space of this long conversation, the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and another human being in all four Gospels, something happens to her. In the very middle of this picture where every seemed wrong, or off: she came to life. Like a wilted flower that desperately needed water. Visibly. Audibly. And immediately she runs to tell others, overflowing with this amazing news that she cannot keep to herself.

“He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” He surely wasn’t what she had been taught to expect. “Is the Lord among us or not?” Things for the thirsty Israelites in the Wilderness of Sin were not going as they expected either. Things were going South for them out there. They had turned to quarreling and complaining. Until water started gushing out of a rock. What’s wrong with that picture? I’m sure it made them look at every rock differently. Hmm, The Lord must be among us, especially when we least expect it.” Then this strange man at her well, at Jacob’s well, somehow knew everything about her.

And yet, he did not give her an answer about who was right and who was wrong, to her big question about the right location of the Temple. Maybe that wasn’t so important after all. Nor did he judge or dismiss her, knowing the truth of her complicated life. He knew her darkest secrets. And still, she was accepted, respected, affirmed. It all seemed so wrong, until in heart she knew as she never knew before: this is life! This is God. Understanding me as I am, and bringing out the best in me. This is right! Right as rain.

Have you ever heard the expression, "Drink a rest?" Walter Brueggemann told a story about his teen years, when he used to paint barns with a man he called "Uncle Billy" Cook and his son, Raymond. "We worked long days six days a week. My arm felt like it would fall off. As tired as I was, my dad gave me some good, concrete advice: "Drink a rest." Take a long, slow walk to get a drink of water. Sip it slowly and make it last. Make it very slow so that you can get some rest. I thought of this good advice concerning rest as I read the amazing account of slave society in the Old South by Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (2021). Among the matters Smith reports on is an old well on Pearl Street,

*A block of bricks that jutted up from the sidewalk, with a golden ring encircling a well that was covered in grass. I looked over the rails and into this hole in the ground and saw deteriorating bricks covered in algae, small plants reaching from one side of the cistern to the other (218). The well dated back to the eighteenth century and served the community in a special way: The first and final thing an enslaved person did every day was get water from the well for their households, and it was here that they were able to spend time together. "You were allowed to look that person in the eyes," Damaras said. "You were allowed to say 'Good morning.' The enslaved people who came to this well," she continued, "were able to reclaim their humanity for just twenty minutes out of their day." They were human at the well, and they were human away from it.*

Time at the well each day with their friends provided moments of wellbeing outside of and beyond the hard days of coerced labor. The enslaved did indeed "drink a rest" from their "normal" day's work of unrelieved bondage. This moment of "humanity" must have kept alive social possibility and communal hope that their lives were not finally defined by or contained within the endless cruelty of enslavement. It is amazing how a watering place or a village well can be a site for human communication, human community, human wellbeing, and human restoration.<sup>ii</sup>

Where is your well, your space where you go to be restored? Gathering for worship, like we have today, can be like coming to the village well. Why else would you come out in all this snow on one less hour of sleep? We all come thirsting for God, for grounding, for the watering and feeding of our souls. What are you truly thirsting for? I asked this question on Wednesday night to you all who were sitting at tables in Fellowship Hall, munching on pizza. You all had a chance to share what came to mind for you that night. And here we are again at the spiritual well, together. So, think for a moment, in the parched places of our souls what are we thirsting for? It could be something for us, our family, our community, our world. What in your heart feels dry and parched. What are *you* thirsty for this morning? In the spirit of this dialogic text, I will give us a total of 60 seconds, for you to turn to a person near you in the pew to share

something that comes to mind when you hear this question, "What are you truly thirsty for?" 30 seconds for each person, I will time it. Find your person, go!

Did you have a good drink just now? As Brian McLaren describes what can happen when we gather at the well we call worship: "So fellowship is for scarred people, and for scared people, and for people who want to believe but aren't sure what or how to believe. When we come together just as we are, we begin to rise again, to believe again, to hope again, to live again."<sup>iii</sup> Just like Jesus and the Samaritan Woman.

I will close with a little story told by Michael Lindvall about his friend Elias Chacour who lives in Israel. Not unlike the way we may ask, "Where are you from?" Especially when we see someone or hear someone who looks or talks differently than we do. A very common question expected question that Elias experienced over and over in Israel was this, "What were you born?... A Shia? And Israeli? A Lebanese? Elias told Michael he has come to answer the same way every time: "I was born a baby."<sup>iv</sup> Friends, let us run from this well to share this good news, to be the wellspring to others, with all we say and do. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> The title and sermon themes for this series, *Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith*. A series created for Lent-Easter Year A, are from A Sanctified Art, LLC.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://churchanew.org/brueggemann/recovering-rest-recovering-humanity?>

<sup>iii</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*, (Jericho Books: New York, NY, 2014), pp. 174-175.

<sup>iv</sup> Michael L. Lindvall, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2019), p. 76-66.