

Since the high plains of Northwest Texas are a semi-arid region, we know about the importance of water.

Okay, we don't live in a deep desert. But we often experience times of drought and water shortage. It often takes lack of something to remind us how much we rely upon it. Water is something we might take for granted until we need it.

In today's lessons we encounter people who are desperate for water.

In the OT lesson from Exodus, we find a people far more needful of water than we are. Even in the midst of dry spells, we have the luxury of turning on our taps or our garden hoses and receiving water.

The children of Israel are in far more dire straits. They are in the desert. They are wandering through the wilderness and they are thirsty. They are so thirsty that they've forgotten about what God has done for them so far. They've forgotten about their deliverance from the power of Pharaoh. They've forgotten the Passover and the Crossing of the Red Sea and the drowning of the Egyptian army. They are so desperate for water that they can focus only on their thirst.

They start to complain. They start to say, "Hey, maybe Egypt wasn't so bad, maybe slavery wasn't so bad. At least there we had water, at least there we had enough to drink." They begin to question God's wisdom and God's goodness. And they began to grumble against Moses. And then miraculously, through Moses, God brings forth water from the rock, and the people's thirsts are satisfied. In the midst of an arid and parched landscape, God brings forth water from an unexpected source, and the people are saved.

In our Gospel reading from the 4th chapter of John, we again find images of water, and of God providing water. But this time, God is providing a different kind of water. Not the water that quenches physical thirst, but the living water of Jesus Christ.

Jesus and his disciples are going from Judea back up to Galilee. But they're taking the shortcut, they're cutting through Samaria, where the Samaritans live. Samaritans are not very popular with Jews. They were religiously and ethnically outcast. Yet to save some time, Jesus and his disciples are crossing Samaria, instead of taking the long way around by way of the Jordan River.

And after a long morning of travel, Jesus is exhausted, Jesus is thirsty, and he sits down by a well. And since Jesus is traveling, he has no means of getting the water out of the well; he has no bucket to draw it with. And so when a Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water for herself, Jesus asks her for a drink.

This is really a remarkable thing that Jesus does, on many levels.

For one thing, Jews tried to avoid any encounters Samaritans.

For another thing men rarely interacted with women.

Plus, there's something odd about the woman herself, for she is coming alone to the well to draw water. She doesn't come with other women. Drawing water was usually a community activity. All the women of the town would come together at the same time in the morning and evening to draw water. It would be a time of fellowship, a time to catch each other up on the news of the community, a time to chat while doing the work of drawing water. Yet this woman didn't come to draw water with the other women. This woman came to draw water alone. So apparently, there is something strange about her, something wrong with her, something that keeps her from being a part of even the Samaritan community.

And yet, Jesus talks with her. Now the 4th chapter of John is long and complex and rich, and we could spend hours talking about it. But I do want to center in upon one aspect of the conversation between Jesus and the woman. During their conversation, the subject turns to water.

Jesus asks for a drink. Then the woman speaks about the fact that their common ancestor Jacob dug this particular well. Then she asks if Jesus is greater than Jacob.

Jesus speaks of the water in the well and says that anyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again.

But Jesus also says that there is a different kind of water, a living water that he can provide. Jesus says,

"The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Jesus offers the woman living water. He doesn't care that she's a Samaritan, or a woman, or someone who has had 5 husbands and who is now living unmarried with a man. Jesus offers this woman new life, new water, a water not to quench her physical thirst, but a deeper water, a water to fill the void in her spirit. And she replies,

"Sir, give us this water always."

There is something special about living water. Living water flows, it bubbles, it moves. It's not stagnant, it doesn't grow pond scum. Living water is pure and fresh. And Jesus is offering the woman a type of spiritual living water that bubbles up, not to temporarily quench thirst, but to be a spring, gushing up to eternal life.

What might that mean?

Let me mention 2 old, classic sermon analogies to try to get a handle on them.

Analogy 1: Two different seas...

Today, as in Jesus' time, there are two inland bodies of water in Israel. The sea, or really the lake of Galilee, and the Dead Sea. The sea of Galilee is a lake teeming with life, a

source of fish. It feeds water into the Jordan river, which flows south into the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea does not teem with life. It's a dead end. It's a salt lake. Water flows into the Dead Sea from the Jordan, but it doesn't flow out. It evaporates in the desert sun, leaving its salt behind. The Dead Sea is too salty to support life.

These two lakes in the Holy Land are reminders of what it means to be and have living water. The sea of Galilee is alive. It takes in living water and gives off living water. The Dead Sea is just that, dead. It takes living water in, but doesn't give any out.

Analogy 2: Two different ships...

The church has often been compared to a ship. But what kind of ship is the church? Some people act like the church is a luxury cruise ship. It's there to serve them. It's there to feed them and nurture them and entertain them. On such a ship, Christians are passengers who take in, but don't give out.

Others act like the church is a freighter, a working ship. The crew on a freighter is fed and taken care of. But they're fed so that they can work. The crew of a freighter has a mission. Like the Sea of Galilee, a freighter crew takes in so that it can give out. Like the Dead Sea, passengers on a luxury ship receive, but they don't give.

What do you do with the living water that Jesus brings? Which kind of ship is the church for you? Those are good questions to ponder during Lent. Let's turn again to John 4 to see how the Samaritan woman answers those questions.

She's had an intense personal encounter with Jesus. He's offered her living water. He's revealed to her that he's the Messiah. And then, what does she do? The woman leaves her water jar and goes back into town. She's no longer interested in drawing regular water. She leaves that physical water jar behind. And she goes to share the good news with her neighbors. Then, John says,

"Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony... And many more believed because of his word."

The woman received, but she also gave. Like the sea of Galilee, she did not hoard the living water given her by Jesus, but she also allowed it to flow through her "downriver" to help others and to bring them to Jesus.

The task and mission of the church is not to be a private club for Christians, to feed and nurture them as an end in itself. The task of the church is to feed and equip the saints for the work of ministry, so that they, in turn, may feed and equip others.

"I tell you," Jesus says, "look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting."

Treasure the living water you've been given, but don't hoard it. Let it flow through you, so that you may serve as a spring of living water and a source of life.