



“Thirsting, Drinking, Sharing”
Sermon Preached by Anne R. Ledbetter
March 27, 2011
Scripture – John 4: 5-42

In last week’s scripture text, Nicodemus, a male Jewish leader came to Jesus in the middle of the night; whereas, in today’s passage from John, a nameless Samaritan woman meets Jesus in the middle of the day. **The gospels are full of stories in which Jesus encounters various people** – from his meeting fisherman along the Sea of Galilee to his responding to blind Bartimaeus along the road out of Jericho, from being baptized by John in the Jordan to being anointed by Mary, from his conversation with the rich young ruler to his interrogation before Pilate, from his confrontation by Martha on his way to Lazarus to his final charge to Peter to feed his sheep. Yet today’s text is the longest such encounter story in scripture; and with whom does Jesus interact in our passage? A woman from Samaria - someone as low as imaginable in the minds of a good Jew. One commentator suggests that this story encapsulates our story – it reflects the life we are called to live as baptized believers.

On their way from Judea to Galilee, Jesus and his disciples trek through Samaria when they decide to take a break and rest. While the friends head out to scrounge for something to eat, Jesus sits down by the well of his ancestor Jacob, and asks a woman for a drink.

It sounds rather ho hum - but it is not. Samaria is enemy territory, no man’s land. Jews habitually went around Samaria, not through it. But John says Jesus **had** to go through Samaria. Was this because they were in a hurry? Or was it because Jesus had a mission in Samaria? Jews do not interact with Samaritans, and men do not speak to women in public. In our story today, Jesus has just broken some very basic rules – but that’s Jesus – always blurring the boundaries, breaking down walls that divide people. Could he have been dramatically demonstrating that no one is outside of God’s circle of love?

Conversing with the woman, our thirsty rabbi realizes that she is thirsting too. For something more than water – for kindness, for understanding, for hope...for meaning...for truth, for living water, for eternal life.

The most dramatic moment of the story occurs at the end of their theological discussion, when Jesus tells of a coming time when believers will worship in Spirit and in truth, because God is Spirit. The woman acknowledges that she knows the Messiah is coming. Then

Jesus says to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” A film director would zoom in at this point – focusing first on Jesus’ face as he reveals his identity, then on the woman as she stares into his eyes trying to gauge their truthfulness.

Suddenly the disciples return, and are dumbfounded to discover the master speaking to a woman, and a Samaritan at that! In a flash she is gone, escaping in such a hurry that she leaves her water jar behind. Where does she go? She rushes to town overflowing with good news. The woman is so amazed by Jesus’ wisdom, compassion, and deep knowledge of her that she runs to tell her neighbors.

When we hear this story, we inevitably reflect on our own thirst. Like Jesus, we have yearned for water after an arduous hike or thirty minutes running nonstop on the soccer field, or a grueling tennis match. At times in our lives we have also thirsted for security and wealth, and sometimes we have been desperate for comfort and healing. Some of us may have struggled with addiction and endured periods of thirsting for alcohol. And surely we all identify with the woman whose soul seems parched for grace.

Isn’t that why we come here each week? To have our spiritual thirst quenched, to find our souls refreshed and renewed. Perhaps we feel the Living Water soaking into our hearts as the choir sings an anthem or while the congregation chants a prayer refrain. Maybe we feel God’s Spirit splashing us in the face when the pastor preaches a sermon just for us, or the Assurance of Forgiveness dissolves our shame. Some may find their thirst sated when a friend greets them warmly with a hug in the parking lot, or when a stranger clasps their hand in the passing of the peace. Undoubtedly, we experience God’s grace in many places, but here at church, within the body of Christ, we come week after week to be filled with Living Water, with the Spirit of Christ.

What do we do after drinking deeply from this eternal spring? Do we keep this oasis of grace a secret? Or do we, like the Samaritan woman, go and tell others? Having found Jesus, the living water at the well, the woman is transformed from a pariah into a proclaimer, an evangelist. Are we evangelists? That’s a scary word for Presbyterians – evangelist. But let’s try modifying the word slightly – not like our DRUM ensemble did on the front of our bulletin with the mixing up of letters, but with the deletion of a few. Drop the EV from the front, and the IST from the back, and what do you have? A-N-G-E-L, angel. An angel is simply a messenger from God, bearing good news. The same work as an evangelist – because you see, they come from the same root word in Greek euongelion.

How does one go about sharing the good news? In the first chapter of John, Jesus gives us the key formula of an evangelist, the pithy yet powerful tidings of an angel messenger. It is *not* the oft quoted phrase, “Be not afraid” though that line certainly comes in handy to many an angel. No, in calling his earliest disciples, Jesus says simply, “Come and see.” Just seven verses later, Philip calls Nathaniel using the same line, “Come and see.” And the woman at the well shares this mantle as an evangelist, calling, “Come and see! Come and seek a man who has told me everything that I have ever done!”

Did you know that our staff spends a lot of time and energy creating announcements, and bulletins and flyers to promote church events, in an effort to draw people to church? One might call it marketing, but is it not really evangelism? This work of evangelism reaps better results through personal invitation, which we can accomplish by releasing a host of angels to bear the good news.

Some of you have already taken flight:

A third grader tells his friend that he cannot sleep over Saturday night because he has Hebrew Scouts the next morning. “What is Hebrew Scouts?” asks his friend. “Come and see,” he replies.

A paralegal at a downtown law firm mentions to a co-worker how yoga has become an integral part of her spiritual nurture. “Where do you attend yoga?” inquires the colleague. “At church.” Really?! “Yep. Come and see!”

A member living at Cokesbury meets a new resident from Kentucky. The newcomer says she enjoys living closer to grandchildren, but misses the mentoring she did in Lexington. “Our church works with Urban Promise to support at-risk kids.” “What’s Urban Promise?” “Come and see.”

A Choir member is working out at a local gym, when her personal trainer mentions how he enjoys singing but does not have the time to commit to a community chorus. “Why don’t you sing with our choir at church?” He protests, “I’m not even a Christian.” “That’s okay. Come and see, then maybe you’ll come and sing!”

This thirsting, drinking and sharing is not a once in a lifetime venture. It’s a description of a faith journey – not a linear construct, but a spiral movement. We continually thirst for God, drink deep of God’s grace, and seek ways to share God’s love.

Did you know that early Christians built their churches near a spring – where they could baptize their members in living, running water, reminding themselves of the living presence of Christ? While our spirits may sometimes feel parched and we falter in faith, we know that God’s Living Water flows eternal if we need only stop and hold out our cup.

God often douses us with holy water when we least expect it. Serving pancakes on Saturday morning, a church member encounters Christ in the homeless man she serves, and finds her heart renewed with living water. Journeying to Guatemala to investigate how our church may help our sisters and brothers there, members meet Christ in the joyous eyes of their hosts and experience an immersion in God’s living, flowing love. A pastor goes to see a dying parishioner – to offer a prayer, a listening ear, a word of hope or comfort; yet it is she who is bathed with the light of Christ, shining from the man’s face as he walks through the valley of the shadow.

Thirsting, drinking, sharing. It is the life of faith, our calling as children of God.

As we leave this place today, may we depart with our cups overflowing, ready and eager to share good news, as angels with an invitation to come and see. With or without words may we beckon to all who are thirsty:

Come and be filled with God's love and grace.

Come and be filled with God's love.

Come and be filled with God.

Come and be filled.

Come and be.

Come.