

Sermon for Sunday, March 19, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

If you were to go to Jacob's Well today
you would find it in the crypt of an Orthodox church
on the eastern side
of the Palestinian city
of Nablus.

It's in the hill country of Samaria,
the region that lies between Galilee to the north
and Jerusalem in the south,
and the well sits in a valley
between Mount Ebor
and Mount Gerazim,

And it was on the direct route
for anyone traveling
to or from
the Holy City,
though many people in Jesus time
chose to go the long way round,
along the Jordan River,
rather than pass through
Samaritan territory.
Not just because
Jews and Samaritans
were typically not
on the best of terms
but also because
it was hard going.
The terrain was mountainous,
and not always safe.
In winter, there were downpours
and the chance of being caught up
in flash flooding;
in summer
water was so scarce,

no rain
from May through September,
that even the wells
sometimes ran dry.

And so when Jesus heard
that the Pharisees
were getting antsy
because he had more followers than John the Baptist -
and probably they weren't so happy either
that right in the middle
of the Passover Festival
he had stormed into the temple courtyard
and with a makeshift whip made of twine
had driven out the sheep and cattle
keep there to purchase
for sacrifices
and had grabbed the bags of coins
from the tables of the money changers
and emptied them over the ground
and diced over the tables,
and you can imagine it, bleating sheep
and coins and cowpats underfoot,
and some people scrambling for the money
and others scrambling out of the way,
and it's no wonder that when the Pharisee Nicodemus
wanted to ask Jesus some questions,
he came quietly
at night
when no one
least of all the other Pharisees
would know about it -
when Jesus heard
that the Pharisees were getting antsy,
and saw him as a troublemaker,
he headed back north,
back to Galilee
where he had grown up.
And probably chose to go through Samaria
rather than the usual route up the Jordan River valley

because that way
he was less likely to run into
and of the Jewish leaders
or any Roman soldiers
they might have co-opted into chasing him.

And because it was after Passover
it was late spring
and the rain had tapered off,
and the streams were drying up
and so Jesus and his disciples
had to play their journey
from village to village,
well to well,
and so it happened
that they arrived outside the village of Sychar
near where Nablus
was later to be built,
and there,
where his ancestor Jacob
had also stopped to break a journey
and stayed long enough
to dig a well,
he sat down to rest while his disciples went into town to get some food,
there
Jesus met a woman.

Unlike Nicodemus
we don't know her name.
Some speculate
that she might have had
a certain reputation -
usually it was an early morning task, going to the well
for the day's water,
and perhaps she wasn't entirely welcome
when the other women of the village
gathered,
and the later talk
of her five husbands
might raise some questions -

but it might just have been
that she was having one of those days that we all have,
when the alarm doesn't off
and the cat throws up
and you run out of coffee,
and nothing seems
to go to plan,
and even the most essential, most routine tasks
are put off.

And so there Jesus was, sitting by the well,
and this woman came to draw water,
and Jesus asked her
for a drink.

And she was surprised.
Because he was clearly
a Jew
and she was a samaritan,
and Jews and Samaritans
didn't get along,
and he was a man
and she was a woman,
and men rarely even bothered to look at women
full in the face,
let alone have a conversation with them
as if they were equals.

And the conversation that happened
is one of the deepest, richest. most extensive conversations
of Scripture.

From a simple request
for a glass of water,
the woman, and us with her,
is drawn into a profound reflection
not just on water
but on the water of life.

And like the conversation with Nicodemus last week,

like most of the conversations Jesus seems to have,
it began with a simple misunderstanding.
“Sir, you don’t have a bucket!”

Jesus might have begun with something simple, right in front of him,
but he quickly moved on
from the literal to the figurative,
from objects
to meaning.

And so he began to talk
about living water.
But the woman
was still thinking
about why he would ask her for water
if he already had it,
and how can he could have it
if he had nothing to get it out of the well.
And if he had some secret source,
maybe he would tell her too, so she wouldn’t have to come to the well every day.

She and Jesus
were just not
on the same page.

But Jesus persisted,
and slowly the woman began to realize
that he wasn’t talking about the well in front of her,
not talking
about the glass of water that he wanted
or the bucket of water
that she would have to haul back to her home;
he was talking about something
that would quench her deepest thirst,
that would bring her life
beyond any life she could imagine.

And then the conversation was cut short.
The disciples arrived back with the food.
The woman turned away so suddenly

that she left her water jar behind.

But unlike Nicodemus
who slipped back into the darkness,
she ran,
like the women did
when they found the empty tomb,
she ran back to her village
and began to tell her neighbors
about the man she met
and the living water,
and then made the leap, “Could he be
the Messiah?”

Meanwhile the disciples
began another conversation
a conversation that showed
that they were just as confused, just as clueless
as Nicodemus
and the woman.
This time
obsessing
about food. But unlike the woman
the gospel doesn't tell us
if they even got
what he was saying.

Maybe
it's because they were interrupted.
The woman had run home to tell everyone about Jesus,
and whatever she said
was so compelling
that they came to see for themselves.
And invited Jesus to stay,
and believed.

It's one of the most powerful stories of transformation in the gospel.
Of a woman
who meets Christ
and finds in him

the water of life.
Of her neighbors,
who hear her story
and go to see for themselves
and like her, believe.
And perhaps,
the whole village.
Because Sychar
was not only where Jacob
had bought some land and dug a well,
it was also where his daughter Dinah
was violated,
taken against her will by a local ruler's son,
and here,
in a place where a woman was violated,
another woman was redeemed.
The arc of redemption
is wide and long.

And it is rooted
in water,
as we are reminded in the blessing over the water
in the service of baptism.

“We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.
Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the
children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son
Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah,
the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into
everlasting life.”

We know
the living water.
We have been baptized in it,
brought into the story
that begins with the waters of creation,
and ends with the river that flows through the glorious city of God
so stunningly described in the book of Revelation,
the holy heavenly city
where we will be reunited with God.

But you know,
sometimes we forget it.
We forget
that we have been swept up in this great flood of God's mercy and redemption.
Sometimes
we're just like the woman at the well,
and like Nicodemus,
and like countless others
who get so stuck looking at the immediate,
the practical,
the concrete,
that we forget to look
for the glorious,
the gracious,
the divine.
We forget to look for God
and then we wonder why
we don't see him.

We don't know
if Jesus ever got his glass of water.
But we did.
We got
the living water,
poured over us in baptism,
filling us and overflowing
blessing all those
around us,
a spring of living water
gushing
to eternal life.