

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Third Sunday in Lent
February 24, 2008
John 4:5-26

“Not Just a Drink of Water”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

We have for our consideration this day a very familiar story about Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. In this account we learn much about the love of our Lord for all the world as well as our part in sharing the Savior. Water plays an important role in understanding this text. May the Lord bless our hearing of his word this day as we consider the theme: “Not Just a Drink of Water.”

I. Water for our Thirst

The Old Testament lesson for today sets up an interesting contrast with the Gospel lesson. In Exodus 17 we hear the children of Israel complaining because of their thirst and the lack of water for them to drink. They say, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” Moses cries out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people?” The Lord will intervene as he instructs Moses to strike the rock with his staff and water will come out of it. Yet the place was called Massah and Meribah which means in Hebrew quarrel and complaint because the people did not trust in the Lord and even asked, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Now in the Gospel lesson, we have an example of thirst as well, but it leads to a far different conclusion. Jesus and his disciples are travelling from Judea to Galilee and they have travelled through Samaria. Now this was already somewhat unusual, for normally Jews would use the long route around rather than risk coming into contact with the despised Samaritans. Our text tells us that Jesus came to the town of Sychar and sat down beside Jacob’s well. This site is still well known in the Holy Land and the well is the location of a Greek Orthodox shrine. A woman of Samaria comes to the well to draw water and Jesus asks her to give him a drink. It is apparent that the woman recognized from his demeanor or his accent that Jesus was a Jew for she is surprised that he asks her for a drink for as John writes, Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. It was probably even problematic that Jesus would address a woman who was a stranger in such a fashion. Nevertheless, he responds, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” Here is one of those phrases in John’s Gospel that is loaded with meaning, perhaps in more ways than one. The woman’s first response to Jesus indicates that she may have been thinking in one way. For “living water” was a description of not the stagnant water of a cistern or pool, but flowing fresh water of a river or spring. When she says to Jesus, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water.” Jacob’s well is very deep. In fact, over the last century or so the water level has varied from 76 to 284 feet down. On average it is about 125 feet to the water. But the water of that well is “living water” for it is fed by a spring deep underground. Indeed the

woman asks Jesus if he is greater than our father Jacob who drank from the well as his sons and livestock. She is interested and curious. She is also quite practical about the water of Jacob's well.

II. Real Living Water

But Jesus is not really interested in that water, he is ready to lead this woman to real living water. "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." So the woman asks him for some of that water, so she will not be thirsty or have to come to the well again. She does not fully understand. And Jesus changes the subject, "Go, call your husband and come here." She replies truthfully, "I have no husband" Jesus tells her, you are right in what you say since you have had five husbands and the man you live with now is not your husband. The Samaritan woman is a sinner. Her personal life reflects that. And she tries to change the subject. You must be a prophet. You know all about me. She then expresses one of the great disputes between the Jews and the Samaritans. "Our Fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Indeed on Mount Gerizim, on whose slopes the village of Sychar was located, there had been for centuries a Samaritan temple which had been destroyed by the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus in 130 B.C. It was an alternate worship site to the temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus points out that neither Jerusalem or that mountain is the true place of worship: "22You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Now we are getting to the heart of the matter. He who is the way and the truth and the life and He who sends forth the Spirit speaks of the true worship of God. And the woman begins to understand. She knows of Jacob and of the worship of God. Now she says, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." She has the hope of the Messiah. She tells Jesus that then all things will be understood. And Jesus tells her, "I who speak to you am he." He is pouring out for her the living water. He is speaking to her of himself who is the life of the world.

Jesus gave to that woman much more than a drink of water.

III. Witness to the Savior

The Gospel reading as we read it ended there, but actually the story continues and sometimes additional verses are read. We need to speak of those verses as well. The disciples come back to Jesus with food from the village. They are surprised he is speaking with this woman. But they say nothing to him. The woman goes back into the town to tell the villagers, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" The villagers go out to

investigate themselves. And Jesus disciples ask him to eat something but he says to them: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. 35 Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest." The Samaritan villagers were on their way to seek him and Jesus is most likely pointing to them as the harvest. They come and speak with Jesus. They ask him to stay. He stays there two days. This portion of John 4 concludes with the statement that many believed in him. Indeed verse 42 says that they said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

The woman shared her faith. The villagers heard the word of Jesus. They witness to the Savior of the world. And we too can do the same. The fields are still white unto the harvest. It is not just missionaries or pastors or evangelists or specially trained individuals who can share. It is all of God's children, all of Christ's church that can give witness to him as the Savior. It is appropriate that the hymn of the day was Martin Luther's great mission hymn which speaks of the power of God's grace to enable us to show to the nations God's riches without measure and unto Christ convert them. What a beautiful account in this Gospel for today. What a message of life in the living water which Christ himself dispenses. It is more than a drink of water for He gives us himself as he has poured out his life for us. Come to water. Come and drink.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Behold I freely give
The living water, thirsty one,
Stoop down and drink and live."
I came to Jesus and I drank
of that life-giving stream.
My thirst was quenched
My soul revived and now I live in Him.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.