

Third Sunday in Lent

February 24, 2008

Exodus 7:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

A wilderness journey is never an easy time or a comfortable place. The wilderness was a time of struggle for the Israelites, Moses, and the Lord. Their question, “Is the LORD among us, or not?”—Are you with us, or not?—is one we may have been tempted to ask in the wilderness ourselves. In all honesty, we *have* all asked it, surely, at one time or another.

Without water in the desert, the people will die. They were not even three months into this journey, still newly redeemed from slavery in Egypt, and far from the land of promise. They did not even know *how* far. Had they known, they might have gone back to Egypt, or just laid right down to die.

Faith can be so fragile, so precarious. They were filled with fear and doubt, even after the Lord already had led them to water at Marah, bitter water that the Lord sweetened, and after that to an oasis with twelve springs and seven palm trees. He had fed them with quails and manna. But there is no water *here*, and *here* is where we thirst, *here* is where we are afraid we are going to die helpless and hopeless. *Is the Lord among us, or not?*

The Lord *was* with them, did *not* abandon them, again came to their help. Even though the people doubted and were afraid, and were, in fact, quite obnoxious, the Lord did not let them die. More than once, of course, the Lord was tempted to destroy them all and start over with a new people he would give to Moses to lead. But the Lord always relented. Perhaps it was and is good to remember the place with the harsh names of fear and doubt, Massah and Meribah, quarreling and testing, because the harshness of life will press us to the brink of desolation and despair again, sooner or later. When we are afraid, ready to give up on God and ourselves, remember Massah and Meribah, where God gave water even in the face of the people’s quarreling and testing.

Remember the words of Thomas Merton spoken in the face of desolation, “Courage comes and goes; hold on for the next supply.” We need the supply of courage, hope, faith, grace, refreshment of spirit, that only God can give. And we do have it, you know.

The problem is not that the Lord is not among us, but that we so readily separate ourselves from Him. Sometimes in weakness—panic, ignorance, or despair—sometimes deliberately—in indifference, or not wanting the bother of loving the Lord with all our heart, mind and strength, or our neighbor as ourselves. As the Israelites in the wilderness “went on sinning against [the LORD], rebelling . . . against the Most High,” (Ps. 78:17), we, go on sinning, too, separating ourselves from God and neighbor, and our real selves. This is the way of human beings.

God’s response to us, though, has been quite extraordinary, unimaginably gracious, extravagant. Writing about today’s passage from the Letter to the Romans, Katherine Grieb put it like this: “. . . having been put right with God through Jesus’ faithfulness—we have peace with

God, a peace that is now possible because of the access to God's grace in which we stand."¹
The Lord is with us.

Whoever we are, wherever we are, whatever state we are in, the Lord does not abandon us but comes to us in love. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . while we were still sinners Christ died for us." (5:6, 8) All of us.

Is the Lord among us, or not?

Whether we see ourselves, or others, as worthy or unworthy, the Lord offers what each and all most need. We have only to recognize him, and to ask. "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." (Jn. 4:10)

As Jesus was returning from Judea to Galilee, he had to go through Samaria, John tells us (4:4) (Yes, there are even more verses to this story, not included in the lectionary!) Not because of geography; he could have gone north through the Jordan valley, a longer but more pleasant way. But Jesus had a date at Jacob's well, with a woman who had never even heard of him. I'm not saying Jesus knew it, either, but looking back on it, the author of the Gospel acc. to John saw that, unlikely as it was in many ways, that encounter was meant to be. He had to go through Samaria.

He was alone, and thirsty, in a hot, dry place with no way to draw water. She came alone, about noon, either very in need of water herself, or hoping to meet no one, or both. She had no idea who he was. Would have drawn her water and left as fast as possible, without looking at him or speaking, but he asked her for a drink.

Pretty outrageous, inappropriate—for a rabbi to speak to a woman in public, for a Jew to use an "unclean" vessel belonging to a Samaritan—and she told him so. She was bold and quick, maybe because she *was* a Samaritan, tired of being looked down on by the Jews as inferior because of ancient history, "mixed" heritage after the Assyrian conquest, seven centuries earlier. If she had been submissive and given him the water, no one would ever have heard about it. But she wasn't, and so we have this account of the longest conversation on record between Jesus and anyone; and she was a Samaritan, and a woman.

Their conversation starts out like a George Burns and Gracie Allen routine. She's confused, as Nicodemus had been, the Pharisee who had everything and needed nothing, but had come to Jesus at night with some kind of need he couldn't seem to name. Nicodemus had given up, and faded out of the picture that night, but the Samaritan woman stood right there in broad daylight and kept coming back at this stranger. Totally engaged, unintimidated, she kept on trying to understand. "Sir, you have no bucket Where do you *get* that living water? Are *you* greater than our ancestor Jacob . . .?"

¹A. Katherine Grieb, The Story of Romans (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 62.

And Jesus stayed right with *her*, moving with her as she moved toward deeper understanding, until she *did* ask him for that living water, and *did* begin to realize who it was that was saying to her, “Give me a drink.” In the midst of it all, came a powerful moment of recognition. When she asked for the water he had to give, Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” . . . She answered him, “I have no husband.”

Indeed, *he* already *knew*. He knew she had had five husbands, “and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” We don’t know why there were five, or who the one whom she now had was. But we have a hunch there were those in town, men and women, who gave her wide berth and gossiped about her as she passed by, even if they only thought she was somehow jinxed. Who *would* marry her after so much bad luck; how *could* she have survived on her own without a man of some kind? He had touched a nerve, a way in, perhaps to the depth of her need, a place in need of healing and refreshment of living water.

He did not condemn her or tell her to get herself straight. When she turned the conversation away from herself to religious differences, he did not press her. He picked up the thread she offered; as if to say, “Okay, we’ll come at it this way.” Following his line of thought, she arrived at this: “I know that Messiah is coming.” Almost a conjecture? And he, having thoroughly recognized her, revealed himself to her, as he had not done before to anyone else: “I am he (*ego emi*), the one who is speaking to you.” I AM, the name that the Lord revealed to Moses at the burning bush in the wilderness of Sinai.

There is a lot going on here; way more than can be covered in one sermon. But how resoundingly the question, “*Is the Lord among us, or not?*” is answered here, “Yes!” How closely that “Yes!” is interwoven with the woman’s openness, to knowing and being known.

In writing about prayer, C. S. Lewis said, “We are always completely . . . known to God. . . . We are like earthworms, cabbages, and nebulae, objects of divine knowledge. But when we (a) become aware of the fact—the present fact, not the generalisation—and (b) assent with all our will to be so known, then we treat ourselves, in relation to God, not as things but as persons. We have unveiled. . . . Instead of merely being known, we show, we tell, we offer ourselves to view.”²

With Jesus’ own encouragement and help, that is what the Samaritan woman did.. She was forthright from the first moment, open to this most unlikely and, by social standards quite inappropriate, conversation, truthful when unexpectedly confronted. She assented to know and be known, and became aware with growing clarity both of her own reality and of the One who was with her.

The outcome being that she stood for a moment face to face with the startling presence of the Messiah. Didn’t completely understand. (Who does or will?) The moment was interrupted by the return of the disciples. But what she saw and understood and could say was enough. She understood enough to share the good news with all the town: “Come and see.”

²C. S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer (San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), 22-23.

With the effect that many did come and see and hear for themselves. With the effect that Jesus stayed with them two days—remained, abided, that powerful word in the Gospel according to John.. With the further effect that many came to believe—to know that the Lord was among them. With the effect that Samaritans, long regarded as “less than,” were reconciled with Jews, in the community of John. With the effect, surely, that the woman’s position in the community changed. With the effect that “you, too, may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (Jn. 20:31)