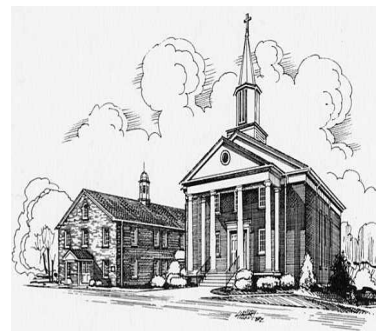


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Third Sunday in Lent

Year A

RCL



Exodus 17:1-7

John 4:5-42

Psalm 95

The Collect

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing

there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Psalm 95 Page 724, 725, BCP

Venite, exultemus

- 1 Come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.
- 2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving
and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.
- 3 For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
- 4 In his hand are the caverns of the earth,
and the heights of the hills are his also.
- 5 The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands have molded the dry land.
- 6 Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee,
and kneel before the LORD our Maker.
- 7 For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.
Oh, that today you would hearken to his voice!
- 8 Harden not your hearts,
as your forebears did in the wilderness,
at Meribah, and on that day at Massah,
when they tempted me.
- 9 They put me to the test,
though they had seen my works.
- 10 Forty years long I detested that generation and said,
"This people are wayward in their hearts;
they do not know my ways."
- 11 So I swore in my wrath,
"They shall not enter into my rest."

John 4:5-42

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater

than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is

in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back

to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have la-

bored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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 truly the Savior of the world.”

SERMON

A thousand seconds is about 17 minutes. How long is a million seconds? About 11 ½ days. How long is a billion seconds? More than 31 years. You can't hold the idea of a billion anything in your mind in the way you can four apples or a dozen muffins, but 13.8 BILLION years ago, there was a big bang. We don't know what banged, or why it banged, or how it banged, but when it banged it began creation, a creation filled with only one thing — hydrogen, the simplest atom, one electron, one proton. None of the other elements, the carbon in your engagement diamond, the gold in your wedding band, the iron in your blood, none of them were yet created. Only hydrogen stood witness in an empty universe.

Time passed on this scale you cannot hold in your mind and gravity began to squeeze. The hydrogen began to heat and nuclear reactions began, and the first

stars came to life and shone in the firmament. They lived out their lives smashing hydrogen into hydrogen and producing other elements until in an orgy of death, one by one they threw off their outer cloaks of iron and carbon and oxygen and the other elements they had made for other, younger, stars to feed upon and exploded into final glory.

Occasionally in the unimaginable empty space, some of the ancient hydrogen, the father of all, met some of the newcomer oxygen and joined with it then gathered itself through inconceivable collisions onto comets which delivered this new substance to a speck of dust wherein we would arise to call it water.

So we rose from this ancient hydrogen, everything that walks or creeps or swims or flies, which has been from the first and still remains, in bodies made mostly of this water, that same aboriginal hydrogen that has

been there from the very first, the incorruptible hydrogen that sprang from the inconceivable initial bang, and still we thirst because we cannot live without this water, this ancient hydrogen. It courses through our veins. It fills our cells. It is the breath of life God breathed into Adam because without it we should be dust. We thirst for this witness to creation for we are of it and it is we, and we are all of us star stuff and witness to the beginning.

We live in a numinous world, church, a world filled with a sense of the presence of the divine for those who will pause and perceive. Not all do. Our fellows see only the outline of the world, its shadow cast by the light of God upon His creation. Just as some do not see in their cool drink the ancient witness to the Big Bang, some do not see the light of God which makes visible the shadows they live within. In our Gospel story Jesus

and the woman are speaking past one another. Much of the congress Christians have in the world is like this – talking past one another. It’s inevitable. Our perceptions diverge from those of our fellows. How could it be otherwise?

Jesus asks the Samaritan woman, “Give me a drink.” Jesus is reaching out to this non-Jewish woman for He is savior to the world. She can’t grasp that. She sees only a great violation of two societal conventions for Jews and Samaritans had had no conversations with one another for the past 200 years (700 years if you take the long view) and Jewish men did not institute conversations with women in any event for it is written in Tractate Abot in Talmud Bavli:

“Hence the sages have said: He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the law and at

the last will inherit Gehenna.”¹

We the readers, must be alert, for something important will come of this conversation.

The woman is astonished, and replies, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” She still does not know what we know — that this will be a conversation about more than water. She sees only the social conventions which stand in the way of this conversation, in the same way we often see our social conventions standing in the way of conversations with non-Christians.

Jesus answered her, “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.”

Jesus is beginning to close the distance. His message is for this woman, and those of her community. She

¹ Pirkei Aboth 1:5;cf 4:27 “The Ethics of the Fathers”

must understand what is being spoken of. But she does not. She is still stuck amid the shadows of the world. Her understanding is limited by her perception of the possible, and those perceptions don't permit her to understand Jesus. She even becomes sarcastic.

The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”

But the failure to connect is even more extreme. The Greek phrase Jesus uses which is translated for us as “living water” is subject to two meanings: free flowing water, as from a spring or running brook, or the life-giving revelation of the divine and heavenly reality in which we live. Just as Jesus did when speaking to Nicodemus, telling him you must be born “*anōthen*”,

which can mean “again”, “anew”, “from above” or all three at once, he now shows this woman that the world she perceives is not the whole of it. Just as water can be understood as a simple chemical compound, or as a necessity for life, or as the home of the most ancient witness to creation, so is this world not so easily netted in our concepts and categories. There is more to it than we perceive. We live in a numinous world of transcendent beauty.

Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Now Jesus has told her that he doesn’t mean water from a spring by his ambiguous phrase, but the water which gives life, but she still cannot escape her precon-

ceptions of what may be in the world. The living water is only attractive to her because it will lighten her work load.

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

In this way we say that prayer “works” or that religion is “good for you”. The sense of the presence of divinity we experience is of value to us insofar as it serves our goals. Water is wet and cools the brow. Beyond that, we lose interest in its genealogy and see none of the wonder. We are bound to our categories and limited by our belief of what is possible.

And now Jesus is ready to end the fencing and speak directly to her, for He knows her.

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You

are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

At this point, we are tempted to say we know her as well, as a profligate, an adulteress, but notice that Jesus does not judge her so. There is no “Go and sin no more” in the mouth of Jesus. Indeed, there are many reasons why the woman should have had so many husbands that don’t reflect on her adversely. We want to assume that we know what we do not know. She may simply have been widowed repeatedly.

Clearly, this touches her. She might be accustomed to wagging tongues, but this Jesus knows, without forcing her to explain, that her marital history is not dishonorable. He “knows everything she has done” as she will proclaim. She accepts this new relationship with Jesus, which is different than her prior experience, with glad-

ness and can go from that acceptance to the next topic. She names the point of separation between Jews and Samaritans, the ancient dispute between Israel and Samaria.

The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

The Samaritans believe that God may be worshiped on Mount Gerizim. The Jews insisted that God could only be properly worshiped at the Temple in Jerusalem. This dispute, which has separated the peoples for so many years, which seems such an enormous barrier to even this conversation, will soon be nothing.

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

In Jesus’ time, Jews believed that Samaritans were

wrong to the core, and Samaritans returned the estimate of Jews. They still do, to some extent, for the Samaritans of today still worship amid the ruins of the monument on Mount Gerizim. But at the core of Jew, Samaritan or Gentile we find the same aboriginal hydrogen. These atoms I drink were there! The categories and limitations humans have imposed upon themselves will soon be swept away and the Samaritan woman will understand. At their core, there is no difference between Samaritans and Jews for they are the same witnesses to creation.

And now, the furrows are plowed, the field is ready and Jesus does the most remarkable thing. He announces Himself to this non-Jewish woman.

The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ).

“When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one

who is speaking to you.”

It is only after we have been stripped to the bone, the impediments of our categories and flawed understanding scraped away, only then can we receive such a revelation. If I made such a statement, or if you did, we would be judged mad as a hatter. If Jesus makes such a statement, then, there are also only two alternatives: Jesus is mad as a hatter, or Jesus is the Messiah. We speak past each other because non-believers cannot accept Jesus' self-revelation, while we, like proud hydrogen's witness to creation, are standing witness to the truth of it.

Before cable TV in the age of analog televisions and roof-top aerials when you twisted the knob from channel three to channel eight, there was static. The static was composed, in part, of the sound of the Big Bang, still echoing through space. God's act of creation is not

finished. You can hear it. You can drink of it. You are it.
Stand witness, church, to God's presence in His numi-
nous world!

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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