

# DESERT AND WELL

*Rev Jim Allan  
Camrose United Church  
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Exodus 17:1-7 - Water from the rock

John 4:5-42 - The Samaritan woman at the well

These are two wonderful stories that have so much richness and depth as metaphors in spiritual life. And the settings themselves, the desert and the well, are such powerful symbols.

It was the desert following the time of the Exodus. The people had been in slavery, and they remembered a time before that--some four centuries before--at the time of their ancestors Jacob and his descendents. They also looked ahead with a sense of promise to a time when there would be a land and there would be a nation. But in between was this moment in the desert, having followed that amazing experience of the Exodus--Moses gathering people up and taking them out of their slavery, their suffering, their anguish in Egypt, out into the wilderness.

So here we have these people who for forty years had lived in the wilderness. There certainly must have been times when they regretted having left Egypt even though there was nothing to look forward to in Egypt. One of the incidents during that desert time was the time of thirsting. It was really a time of fear, because it was not just being thirsty from having had nothing to drink for a while; rather, it was being thirsty because it looked like there was no water and the people were just out here to die. So in that fearful moment it was for them a time of transition which turned out to be the centre point around which the whole history of Israel turns. In the middle of their experience, however, it didn't look like a glorious story that they were going to tell about forever. It just looked like they were going to die. So here we have that thirsting moment in the history of the people of Israel--the emptiness of the desert wilderness, maybe even the feeling of being lost and not knowing where they were going.

The lectionary sets that Exodus reading in juxtaposition with the John story of the woman at the well. So we have the common theme of water, the way water comes to us--in Jesus words at the well, the "living water." But here we have this woman, not a desert. We have this picture and we kind of fill it in as background from the little snippets we hear: she has been married five times; she's living with someone who is not her husband now; she's a Samaritan; she doesn't expect any man, let alone a Jew, even to talk to her in public. Here she is, drawing water from the well which is probably the most routine drudgery of her life. It's something she does every day or maybe more than once a day. It's a deep well, so there's much work drawing the water and taking it home. Here is someone whom, if we were portraying the story in a dramatic way, we might characterize as someone whose life had become really empty. Maybe she was a very cynical kind of person, given up on finding any real joy or meaning in life, just going through the motions. So Jesus

meets her, just as Moses takes the Hebrew people to the rock with the staff. And something brand new, something very different, happens.

In both stories we see something miraculous. It's in what Jesus says, but it's also in this sense of his insight into her life. She says: "Whoa, this is a prophet, now we know, because he told me everything that I have ever done." And at the rock we have an even more dramatically miraculous story when the staff hits the rock and there is water in the middle of the wilderness.

We have the question of how to interpret this miraculousness, this supernatural power portrayed at various points in the Bible. The thinking of many of us has been moving toward a more metaphorical way of understanding scripture. I, as many within the church, have lately been reading the works of Marcus Borg. Borg gathers up much of the thinking and the movement in our understanding of scripture and our tradition; and he states it in such a clear, easy, accessible way. That makes this a very exciting time to be living in the church as we rethink our faith and become able to identify how we can engage the scriptures and the reality of Jesus Christ in the Christian life as a whole. In his two most recent books I've been reading--*Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* and *The Heart of Christianity*--Borg suggests even more clearly than ever before that the stories of the Bible are best interpreted in an historical metaphorical way. What, basically, he says is that there's an historical core of truth of an actual event, of actual people. However, in understanding those things, and seeing or discerning God having been with them through the centuries, the stories have been expanded into metaphorical stories that reflect the inner side of life.

I find what Borg says to be very helpful because it helps me to unhook, even more deeply than ever before, from the questions about whether something could or did happen. As someone once said: "Everything in the Bible is true, and some of it even happened." We begin to understand that the metaphorical truth contained in the stories coming from the hearts and the imagination of the people, and the metaphorical expansions of those stories, move us to the greatest and deepest level of truth and far beyond the factual aspect.

Take another look, therefore, at these stories where there is a supernatural miraculousness about Jesus' prophetic insight, and about the water coming out of the rock. It seems to me that when we have those miraculous things happening in a story, what the story is saying metaphorically, what it is doing metaphorically, is pointing us toward the inner meaning of the event--toward what we can't see on the surface, what we can't record in the history books. It is pointing us toward the inner meaning, the inner reality, the inner truth. I think what Jesus means when he speaks of "truth," and talks about worshipping "in spirit and in truth," is that we are to get off the surface and down to the depth--to look at the inside of life. That's really what the prophets were doing. They were people who could look at what was happening in the world and see beyond the surface and the facts to the inner meaning, the significance, the sacred depth of what was happening. And they could say that out loud.

So in the story of the water from the rock, of the people in the wilderness, we have a metaphor of all the different levels of our lives when we have wilderness-wandering moments. Those are the times when we leave the conventional, established, comfortable things of our lives. Or they may be taken from us, perhaps a tragic kind of thing. But in

one way or another we end up in some kind of a dry, thirsty, wilderness place in our lives-- a place where we are looking, where we are searching for something new, for some different direction. We are no longer looking in the same old places we've always looked. And when we let go, when enough has been stripped away, when we are dry enough and thirsty enough and lost enough, what happens is that the water we need to sustain us--the living water, the water that quenches the thirst of the soul--comes to us. It comes not from where we expected it, but from the last place we would expect it--from a rock.

Metaphorically, this is saying that the source of the real living water of life is the place we would least expect, and that it doesn't come until we are standing there before the rock in the midst of the desert where our thirst is the deepest. At that point we know thoroughly that we can't do anything to turn our lives around and take care of ourselves unless we have opened our hearts fully to God in that depth of helplessness. That's when the water comes.

I have a poem prayer that I want to read. It is written by Ted Loder in a book entitled *Guerrillas of Grace*. Ted Loader is the senior minister of First United Methodist Church in Germantown, Philadelphia. The poem is entitled "Pry Me off Dead Centre."

Oh persistent God  
deliver me from assuming your mercy is gentle.  
Pressure me that I may grow more human,  
    not through the lessening of my struggles,  
    but through an expansion of them  
    that will undamn me  
    and unbury my gifts.  
Deepen my hurt  
    until I learn to share it  
    and myself  
    openly,  
    and my needs honestly.  
Sharpen my fears  
    until I name them  
    and release the power I have locked in them  
    and they in me.  
Accentuate my confusion  
    until I shed those grandiose expectations  
    that divert me from the small, glad gifts  
    of the now and the here and the me.  
Expose my shame where it shivers,  
    crouched behind the curtains of propriety,  
    until I can laugh at last  
    through my common frailties and failures,  
    laugh my way toward becoming whole.  
Deliver me  
    from just going through the motions  
    and wasting everything I have  
    which is today,  
        a chance  
        a choice,

my creativity,  
your call.  
O persistent God,  
Let how much it all matters  
Pry me off dead center  
So if I am moved inside  
to tears  
or sighs  
or screams  
or smiles  
or dreams,  
They will be real  
And I will be in touch with who I am  
and who you are  
and who my sisters and brothers are.<sup>1</sup>

Marcus Borg says there is an element at the very heart of Christianity that is also at the heart of all other religious traditions. He says there's a common pattern about spiritual life which, in Christian terms, is the dying and the rising. That is what Loder describes as having all pretence stripped away so that we are left with a kind of nakedness which becomes the beginning point from which the true fullness of life arises. All other religious traditions, also, have their ways of talking about the letting go, the emptying, the stripping away, the dying for the sake of rebirth into the fullness of life.

So there is another metaphor, this wilderness moment when we're lost and thirsting, that opens us to the true life that is there in the water. Jesus in the story from John's gospel reflects that thirsting in the woman and the water in the well. There she is, a Samaritan woman, and Jesus is a Jew. Jews don't speak to Samaritans. Men don't speak to women in public, especially to women such as she, and yet there he is. He approaches and talks to her, and that's a surprise right there. He talks about "living water," but at first she doesn't understand. She asks: "Well, where are you going to get that water from? We've got a well here and it's deep. Where is your well?" So she is responding on the surface level, but he keeps nudging her toward the depth and the inner meaning of what's there. He sees into her life, he sees everything she has done, he knows how many husbands she has had. At first glance that seems like a miraculous prophetic thing, but if we look there, take that miraculousness as a symbol or a signal to look deeper, we'll see its inner meaning.

What does it mean to have someone with you who sees into your heart, who sees who you really are, who sees all the things that you don't usually want people to see? What does it mean to have someone like that with you, looking at you in a way that makes you feel opened up and naked, and yet who looks at you graciously and loves you anyway? What a powerful life-transforming experience! Then he says: "Well, if you knew who I really am. . . ." That's where it becomes evident that this is the Messiah, this is a prophet, this is the Christ, standing here with her. And so he challenges her to look beyond the surface where he is just a man, a Jew, who shouldn't be talking to her--to look beyond all those surface things that divide them. He says: "If you really saw who I am you would see

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace* (Innisfree Press, 1984) pp. 96-97.

past all those divisions. As a matter of fact you would see the sacred in me; you would see the Christ in me.”

When Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ he talks of Christ living in the hearts of all of us. And there is another transformation of our way of seeing: we can see the sacred presence in others, and they become the channels of God’s grace to us. They become the angels in our lives; they become the ones through whom God has come to us. We learn to see Christ, to recognize Christ, in our daily lives all around us. And then Jesus and the woman talk about the well. This is Jacob’s well, and it has been there for hundreds of years. It was given to the people by their legendary ancestor at a time that goes back before the division of the Jews and the Samaritans, back to the time of their common ancestry when they were one people.

The well itself as a metaphor has even more powerful meaning. Carl Jung uses “well” as a metaphor for the unconscious. The transformation, the integration of life, of which he speaks is about doing that inner journey--looking inward, looking deeply inward, past all that we think we are in our personality. It involves looking to all the things that we would rather not look at, that we regret about our own lives and our own weaknesses; and even deeper than that to find our own inner gold, the gold that is at the heart of every one of us. And then Jung says we must look even more deeply than that until we come to the very depth of our inner being. At that point we come to the place where it’s no longer just us; it’s like the well touching the subterranean stream that is the common source of water. So the wells aren’t really separate. They are all touching the same ground water source. And that’s Jung’s image of the transcendent. The very depth of our being is where we encounter the transcendent, the sacred. And that’s where we tap into the water that is the “living water” of which Jesus speaks.

The woman challenges him about how he can be talking to her inasmuch as the Jews and the Samaritans are separated. “You Jews worship there and we worship here, you know; how can we come together?” Jesus says it doesn’t matter where we worship; that’s just the surface again. It doesn’t matter where we worship. We worship in spirit and in truth. So you see he is moving the conversation from the outer things such as locations to the inner things. We find that at the depth of the well, at the transcendent, and then we are no longer separate. We find the spirit and truth. In Jesus’ metaphorical language that’s where we worship because that is the place, the inner place, that is the source of the true living water. “Living water” itself is a marvellous metaphor. It’s that kind of metaphor that is actually self-contradictory; it’s actually an oxymoron because water is not alive. It’s the least alive of substances in our world. “Living water.” And so even that image itself challenges us to let go of surface thinking and to think into the depth and the mystery and the truth of life. It challenges us to think into the inner spirit and truth of life. In that image is contained the whole promise that guided the people in the Exodus, and the whole promise that is at the heart of the gospel. And no matter how dry and thirsty life gets, the living water is at the very heart of life, even in the driest place. That is the sacred spirit presence that quenches our thirst in a way that nothing has ever quenched our thirst before. It quenches our thirst in a way that we will never thirst again.

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