

The Third Sunday in Lent, 12 March 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of the One who is with us always, offering the water that springs up to eternal life. Amen.

It seems that the first thing that strikes people about today's readings is the length of one from the Gospel of John. Commentaries on the passage all begin by mentioning that it is the longest single narrative in the Gospels. The story is remarkable in its fullness. Most often the stories Jesus tells and the narratives of events in his earthly life are very brief, with just one or two moments, a quick glimpse. But this is a story in all its fullness, one that draws us in and has something for everyone. It refers back to the days of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, common ancestors of the Samaritans and the Judeans, and looks ahead to the promise of eternal life, while at the same time dealing with the immediate concerns of people in first century Palestine. It talks about common human concerns, like getting food and water, as well as profound spiritual things like the expectation of God's Messiah. There is a lot to think about and the narrative goes on long enough to give us time to think, to consider, even perhaps to identify with the woman who engages Jesus in conversation, or with the townspeople who are drawn in by her story and then encounter Jesus for themselves.

Our Gospel shows us a woman who discovers the Messiah in the midst of her daily drudgery. She has a busy life (obviously an unstable one given her number of husbands and non-husbands) and much hard work to do. She is probably ostracized within her society because of being so often either widowed or divorced by whatever current husband. (Remember that only the man could end a marriage with divorce.) There was no stability in her life, and probably little social support – which is probably why she is at the well in the heat of midday, in order to avoid the unwelcoming morning crowds. She would much rather not have to carry great heavy jugs of water from the well. But despite all this, all the drudgery and rejection, she never loses her awareness of the larger questions of life. Her questions about life remain near the surface of her mind so that she is ready to seize the opportunity to ask. This always strikes me as surprising and appealing.

First she is startled by how Jesus ignores the traditional taboos about men speaking to women outside their family and about any Judean speaking with any Samaritan. Both are clear violations of the holiness code and of the normal practice everyone is used to. She is surprised and seizes the opportunity to learn. Samaritans and Judeans (like different varieties of Christians) have differing interpretations of their common history and of the right relationship with God embedded in it.

She is curious and decides to take advantage of the fact that this Judean stranger is engaging her. "Where are we really meant to worship?" she asks Jesus. What is the real way to God? Now I do not think that most of us, encountering a holy man in the supermarket, would pause between the cereal and the milk to ask him about true worship. I would probably be too focused on getting everything on my list, paying, and moving on to the next essential task.

But the Samaritan woman paused. First, she paused in puzzlement. How does it happen that you are speaking to a woman you do not know? How does it happen that you are speaking to a despised Samaritan? Then, having recognized that this was a very special person, she moves on to important questions – about life and truth and appropriate worship.

We see in this story an example of how God comes to meet us, ready to fill our every need, right in the midst of the busy-ness of our lives. God is there for us. We have but to recognize the divine appearance, which is always unexpected, surprising, mysterious. We need to be ready with our questions, as well as our devotion.

The woman at the well brings back to my mind a small pamphlet I came upon decades ago called "Brother Lawrence and his Arrow Prayers". Brother Lawrence's life spanned the entire 17th century. For the first half, he was a soldier and then a hermit, going from the extreme of submersion in the chaos of life to the extreme of total withdrawal.

Then in 1649 he entered the Carmelite monastery in Paris and was put in charge of the kitchen. From then on, his life consisted outwardly of much busy, uninspiring work, such as washing dishes. But what he wrote about,

and what people have talked about ever since, was his habit of conversing with God continually while performing even the most menial tasks.

His practice is referred to as the “Practice of the Presence of God.” What this means is training oneself to be always entertaining thoughts or images of God, with the aid either of the imagination or of the intellect, no matter what outward activity one is engaged in. I would maintain that for most of us it would not be a question of either/or, but both/and, intellect and imagination being complementary in such a discipline of keeping God always before us.

Brother Lawrence described his practice as, ‘shooting little arrows of prayer’ up to God from the depths of the soap suds. When I was in seminary, I had a 45-mile commute each way every day and I used that time in the car to begin a serious attempt at learning this discipline. I remember writing a reflection on what I called my ‘Freeway Prayers’, much to the entertainment of the Seminary Dean.

I have never perfected the life lived in total recollection recommended and practiced by Brother Lawrence, but I do keep it always as an ideal to strive toward, an ideal balanced and complimented by the Buddhist idea of total mindfulness, of being totally present to the current moment and its activity, which together make possible a combination of interior quiet and exterior attentiveness.

At their fullest development, the Practice of the Presence of God and Mindfulness are intimidatingly comprehensive, aiming at perfection, but at the same time they are appealing in their simplicity. Such discipline can be taken on at any moment, in any context. A total life change and abandonment is not necessary. Life change is the result, not the precondition.

In this time of Lent, this time of preparation for the ultimate revelation of God’s will and love for us and all creation in the Paschal Mystery of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus, I commend to all of us the practice of inner quiet. As Brother Lawrence said, one can begin either with intellectual propositions, such as that ‘God is Love’, or with images such as the crucified Christ gazing lovingly at us from the cross, or God the Loving Mother so dear to Dame Julian, or the springs of living water Jesus talked about with the woman at the well.

As you begin an activity, hold the thought or image before yourself or repeat a favorite devotional phrase, whatever turns your heart to God. This is a way to take a small step towards building the interior closet that Jesus invites us to pray in, with the confidence that God will be there.

We all need places to “be still and know that God is God.” We need them outwardly, but inwardly most of all.

“The hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.” We desire to be with God always and so we are. We desire to know God always and so we can. Our job is to sweep clean our inner room and fill it with the incense of longing and the continual chant of devotion. And then when the Lord reveals himself to us in the dish water or at the well, we too will be able to greet him and drink from the “spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

The woman at the well recognizes that her encounter is not just for her but for everyone. She feels the need to share the good news, and to try to understand it in community. Jesus tells her that he is the Messiah the one that his people and her people have all been waiting for. She abandons her water jug and runs to tell other people and also to ask them – “This can’t really be the Messiah, can it?” She understands that we can look to one another for understanding and connection – and that revelations are meant to be shared.

The townspeople are brought to Jesus by the woman’s story and her questions, but it is their own personal encounters that establish the faith in them.

Lent is a time to listen and look and share and contemplate, to see where God in Christ may be breaking in; it is a time to look and listen, to spend time in the places where God speaks to us, to listen when other people tell us about their encounters, and to share our own. The woman expected to be alone at the well and just draw her daily household water as usual. What happened was so much more than that – and her always alert and curious mind was open to the encounter – may the same be true for us! Amen.