

Living Waters

A woman, Jesus, and the well which connects them

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Lent 3A
John 4:5-42
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Growing up on Lake Huron, in the northern part of the lower peninsula of Michigan, the living water of the Great Lakes is persistently present. Like a slumbering beast you knew would awaken. Not to us by the shore, by the harbor where fishing boats and freighters would dock. But out a few miles from the coast. Where storms whip the waves into a violent rage, bringing even the most stable of human-made vessels into sinking crypts.

The water is alive. But in the light of day, it looks like it's sleeping.

The water was always present. Just look east. You can find your bearings from that. Swim and make sandcastles. Or find one of the hundreds of rivers and canoe or kayak into the heart of the state. Follow riverbanks which hold the trees at bay; the canopies speckling the water with dark dots amid the sun's shimmer, dancing next to the craft.

There, water is always present. Like God gave it to us. And we were sure to protect it. Even if it meant cleaning up after Abitibi, Lafarge. Reclaiming the Duck Park as a wildlife sanctuary from years of underage drinking and polluting.

I never knew thirst. Not there. There, water, living water was everywhere. Living as John means, flowing, fresh, non-stagnant water. That we had. And we trusted in that more than we trusted in anything else. More than God.

The living water

There's something about trust and living water. Something elementally connected between our need for survival and our yearning for God. Between a need for safety and a need to know and be loved by God.

There's a reason Jesus's double meaning for "living water" works in our story. And in our lives. Because it is literal and metaphorical. It is true in both ways. Living water is the key to life. And the key to new life through Jesus.

We baptize in the stuff. And we long to sate our thirsts. Our physical and metaphysical thirsts. The yearning for safety and life; the yearning for belief and communion.

Water, living water, is a both/and. There is no one without the other.

Which is why we so jealously guard our access. To both. To our wells and water tables. And our redemptive faith.

And we want to believe we are being faithful when we sell our water or deprive these wells; declaring them different and not good enough. Not the real center of our faith.

Even the wells we use to claim the boundaries of faith are wells given to us all.

The Woman

Our gospel story centers around a meeting between Jesus and the woman at the well. The very location and nature of this interaction tells the bulk of the story for us.

Jesus shouldn't talk to her. 1) She's a woman. A man, alone, wouldn't talk to a woman alone. So this conversation is elicited. And 2) She's a Samaritan. Which we know are a total "other" in that culture. Like the Hatfields and the McCoys; they're related but they're enemies.

And this well isn't any old well. It's Jacob's Well, a gift from God, a source of water given to the people before they were split between Jewish and Samaritan. It is a place of common understanding, common origin, and common blessing.

And while the conversation is full of back and forth (I like to cast the woman as Katherine Hepburn) it's full of openness and compassion. Here, at this common well, at this gift from God, we have a Jew and a Samaritan, a man and a woman in a very human conversation.

She keeps wanting to focus on the details: on ownership, expectations, personalities, location. She's focused on the little fights and divisions. And Jesus keeps steering her toward him and what he is offering: the very life-saving living water of God.

That's how she sees. God opens the woman's eyes and she can see that this isn't about those little things; when she directs her gaze at Jesus. He points her to God. That God gave Jesus as a living water. Not "to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

So she gets her friends and family and everybody she can to share the living water, this blessing in their midst. And they see him too.

Jesus. The water which flows through and under these barriers we erect to divide each other. Rivers flow and rain falls on both sides of the walls.

Jesus

In the end, the disciples come back but they don't see Jesus that way yet. Not like the people who really get Jesus. They still imagine he's a conquering king, not the very means of life. The provider of dominance and freedom, not the preserver of life. Like water, food, and shelter.

For us, it's far too easy to make the metaphor make sense and ignore the literal. Ignoring the conviction that following Jesus puts us to work. In the literal and metaphorical saving business.

It's his followers who, in the verses before our reading, are the ones baptizing people. Not Jesus. That Jesus would continue to point out all the ways our culture, including our churches, our businesses, and our government fail to protect our most vulnerable.

This is why we fast in Lent. To get some of the stuff out of the way so that we can better see. So we toss the crutches we lean on. So that we can see him. Hear his voice. Believe.

So we can see past the stuff we take for granted. Our comforts. Cars which run. Heat or A/C in our homes. Food on the table. Water from the tap.

Faith on demand, the creature comforts of our culture, literal safety. All of us yearning for life. And hope. And community. Living water which is always there. Moving, flowing, flickering the sun's reflection, even in the cold of winter, past the ice-rimmed shores. The water is always cold. Alive. It only appears to be sleeping.