

## **THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT—CYCLE A**

**February 23-24, 2008**

Beginning today, this third Sunday of Lent, we hear the first of three stories from John's Gospel that tell us something powerful about the gift given us in our Lord. The sheer volume of verses read in each of these stories is more than normal Gospel. All three stories speak to the great need for life that is both deeply meaningful and transforming. In each of these stories, we meet a person whose experience is like a mirror in which we see ourselves. All three stories tell us what we most need to hear and call us to who we most need to become.

The first of these stories takes place outside a small village in Samaria, some 15 miles north of Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples are traveling from the Holy City, on their way back to Galilee. Having descended from the heights of Jerusalem to the hot, dry region of Samaria, he and his friends come to a well that the patriarch Jacob dug some 2,000 years earlier. Hungry and tired, the disciples leave Jesus at the well where he can rest while they go into the village to buy food. Some time passes when a woman, carrying a large, terra cotta jar, comes to the well to draw water for her household. It is here, in that space and time between our Lord and this unnamed woman, that we meet ourselves, clothed in the rough cotton garb of a first century stranger. Without introduction, Jesus asks her for a drink. Because Jews and Samaritans had chilly relations with each other and because he, a man, was asking a woman who was both Samaritan and a stranger for a drink, we lean in to the conversation, curious to know more.

What follows is a conversation about thirst and water, custom and worship, confusion and discovery. Yes, Jesus talks with her about her present and her past, curious himself why this woman was coming to the well at high noon knowing that women came to draw water at dawn and dusk. As they talk, our Lord gently but powerfully moves into her spiritual and emotional space until she realizes what we already know. He is the Messiah, the One promised long ago, who is the Savior of the world.

I wonder: What if the well in this story is a metaphor, a symbol for God's renewing, thirst-quenching grace? If you please, this lengthy, detailed narrative could be a well of cool, spiritual water with so many opportunities to lower our bucket for a drink. And if we would, if we would take a few

minutes right now to rest our weary bones on the warm stones of this well, we might find water that is life in all its God-kissed wonder.

### **Refrain: Give Us Living Water**

**Are you thirsty?** What if we lowered our empty, terra cotta vessel of failure into this well of God's grace? The woman in the story did not need Jesus or anyone else to tell her how broken and cracked her life had become. In her rearview mirror were five husbands who had used, perhaps abused, and discarded her like so much crumpled paper. Now, she lived with a sixth man who was not her husband, no doubt she was once again being used. For years, she had lowered her life many times into many wells, over and over again, thirsty to the point of death, only to bring up time after time the brutal pain of failure.

**Are you thirsty?** This Samaritan woman's spiritual DNA is in all of us. To be human is to experience no small amount of failure throughout life's journey. We try and fail at all kinds of things: hobbies, learning, relationships, friendships, business ventures, and yes, religious devotions. The story tells us clearly that the greater sin is not the failure at any of these things; failure, like success, is part of the human experience.

No, the greater sin is how we respond when failure comes, as surely as it will. When one of life's many experiences bruises, wounds, even crushes us, will we choose to lower our failed lives into the renewing water of God's grace? Or, do we, like this woman, simply bounce from experience to experience, plagued by guilt, infected with regret, all the while wondering where we are and where God might be.

**Are you thirsty?** Do you want a drink that satisfies?

Others of us may need to lower the leaky pot of what could best be described as religious "notions" into this well gurgling with God's grace. Listen to the conversation between this woman and our Lord and you will overhear so many of our own confusions about faith, worship, and devotion. Rather than drink deeply from our Lord's nourishing grace, this woman would have hijacked the conversation, turning it into a theological debate. Don't be too hard on her. We too, when God's Spirit tugs at our hearts, can re-focus the conversation from our deepest needs to some sterile, academic debate about the trinity, the liturgy, language, some political issue, or what

we believe to be the proper expression of faith. We all have opinions and notions, but often they are nothing more than leaky and cracked pots that rob us of God's thirst-quenching grace.

### **Refrain: Give Us Living Water**

So where does this leave us, this third Sunday of Lent? What are we to do with the imposters of human failure and shallow notions? The story gives us good and faithful options. For one, we can let our Lord lead us in life's journey, rather than us attempting to lead him. Simply put, **Lent is God's open invitation for us to, once again, follow Jesus.** If we so choose, we must let him lead us from our self-centered agendas to his cross of sacrifice and life. The woman in the story tries to re-frame the conversation to engage Jesus in a debate our religion, worship, and politics. Not until she relents, gives in, concedes to his loving presence does she realize all her words are but empty syllables.

What should we do? We simply bring every broken, dry, and useless vessel to Jesus, asking him to make them new in the nourishing, renewing waters of his grace. We dare lower our old, tried but failed lives into God's well of grace by following Jesus wherever he may lead. And when we do, we, like the woman long ago, may hear these thirst-quenching words: "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty."

**Are you thirsty?** Who isn't! In the gift of God we find the promise of living water without end. Who knows, maybe during these Lenten days, we may come to this well of unending grace and there meet the One who alone can transform our lives and make them new. Are you thirsty?

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