

Shaped through Thirst

Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:13-14; Psalm 95

One summer I traveled west with two friends. We eagerly anticipated a motorized raft ride on the Colorado River – a day long trip through the grandeur of the Grand Canyon. Early one morning, we boarded a bus and rode about twenty miles through the desert to our launch site. We donned our life jackets, stepped into the raft with three other travelers and two guides, and shouted with joy as the raft started down the river. We admired the steep rocky canyon walls as our guides attempted to start the motor. After one particularly mighty pull, our guides – and we – watched in dismay as the motor fell off the raft into the water. The current continued to carry us along as the guides attempted to locate some paddles. Alas, there were none to be found.

Fortunately, after a few minutes, our raft ran aground. Unfortunately, by then we were several miles from our launch site and there was no easy way to get back to it. We had no means of communicating with the bus driver or the rafting company. This was before the age of cell phones. I doubt there would have been a signal even if we had them.

After much discussion, the guides decided the best course of action was for one of them to climb up the rocky cliff and hike back to their headquarters for help. Their best estimate was that we would not be able to continue our journey until the next day.

We had not landed on a beach. There was a square foot or two of sand here and there. Mostly we were surrounded by rocks. The rocks were hard, the sun was hot, the shade was scarce, and the scorpions were plentiful. Our emotions fluctuated between anger and acceptance, between panic and calm. We did everything we could think of to be comfortable and to amuse ourselves.

As the day wore on, other rafts passed by. The people who stopped would make sure we weren't injured, share some of their food and drink, and move on. We spent the night sleeping under the stars with rocks for our beds.

The next morning the new motor arrived. We were not excited to learn that there was no way out other than to complete the entire day-long trip. However, throughout the day, we managed to find some joy in the scenery and in being together. Finally, after a boat ride in the dark across a large lake and a bus ride with a driver who may or may not have been inebriated, we arrived safely back at our motel.

This experience always comes to my mind as I read the story from Exodus 17.

Let's review the background to the story. The Israelites were descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. All their lives they heard about the covenant God made with their ancestors promising that they would become a great nation and that all nations would be blessed through them. In more recent history, they had been slaves in Egypt for several hundred years, an unexpected and terribly distressing turn of events for these people who had been promised great things. A miraculous chain of events led to their release from slavery; a deliverance that was led by the man, Moses, but also by God in a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night. When the Egyptians pursued them, God provided a way of escape for them across the Red Sea.

They spent the next 40 years wandering through the wilderness of the Sinai. On more than one occasion they got quite discouraged and complained to Moses that they would have had a better life if they had stayed in Egypt and remained in slavery. While they were in the desert, God provided them with water and with food – not in abundance but sufficient for each day.

The account in Exodus 17 highlights their discomfort. There was no water available for them. They were thirsty. They were complaining, remembering again the “good old days” in Egypt – the “good old days” when they were living in slavery. Moses cried out to the Lord, the Lord promised to provide if Moses would do as instructed, and once again the Lord provided the Israelites with what they were asking for, with the water they needed.

It’s easy to be critical of the Israelites with their constant complaining and refusal to follow God’s instructions to them. The writer of Psalm 95 uses this story as a negative example. “Do not do what they did at Massah – which means testing – and at Meribah – which means complaining,” the psalmist writes. “Instead, sing to the Lord, give thanks, remember God’s mighty acts, and worship him.”

In previous sermons on this story, I stated that I could give these people a little slack, especially when I remembered the incident in Arizona. That my 40-hour adventure in the river canyon may have given me a tiny taste of the 40-year adventure the Israelites experienced. That a trip begun with great excitement can quickly take an unexpected turn and stretch out much longer than anticipated. That physical discomforts lead to breakdowns of the spirit. That when a person is hot, thirsty, hungry, exhausted, and unsure about what is going to happen next, it’s hard not to be cranky even though provisions are periodically sent your way.

That’s all true. However, my short ordeal doesn’t really compare with their long sojourn. I’ve tended to think of the Israelites as whiners. Whining comes from people for things they want, not what they need. But the Israelites were living in a desert, a very dangerous place. They were being provided for, but their existence was tenuous. Even as they trusted God, their concerns for food, water, and safety were legitimate. Even more than their concerns for themselves were their anxieties about their children and the elderly among them. Their cries were laments more than they were complaints. Their anger at Moses came from the seriousness of their situation. Their anxiety fueled their very human need to blame someone – to appeal to someone for relief even if they trusted God, even as they knew God had been providing for them.¹

For modern examples, think of the people in Flint, Michigan, and Jackson, Mississippi – places where they don’t have access to clean, healthy, life-sustaining water. Think of Palestine, Ohio, where parents don’t know if it’s safe to bring their children back to their homes and drink the water. Where farmers don’t know if they’ll be able to safely harvest their crops. Where no one knows what the long-term health impacts could be.² Their laments, their cries for help, their demands for justice are legitimate, even if, even as, they trust that God is with them.

The biblical stories we’re reading today remind us that as humans we have needs – both physical and spiritual. Our physical bodies are integral to our humanity. Our bodies and our spirits rest in God’s loving care. In Exodus, water became the answer to the question, “Is the Lord among us or not?” For the Israelites, the satisfying of their basic physical needs confirmed God’s presence.

For the woman Jesus met at a well in Samaria, a drink of water to meet physical needs quickly led into a discussion of living water that quenches spiritual thirst. This encounter

¹ Ideas suggested from [Lent 3A — Pulpit Fiction](#)

² [5 demands from East Palestine residents after train derailment \(msnbc.com\)](#)

illustrated the fact that God loves the whole world, not just part of it. That Jesus came for everyone, not just for a select group.

Again, a review of history provides background for the story. Much of what we read in the Old Testament is about the forming of a nation, a people of God, the Israelites. Over and over God stated that through this nation all nations would be blessed. However, the Israelites struggled so much for survival that at times they drew boundaries in places God had not intended them to be drawn.

For the people living in Judea and Galilee in the time of Jesus, Samaria was a place to be avoided. Before Solomon's death 1000 years earlier, all three regions were part of a united Israel. After the kingdom divided and the northern kingdom fell to Assyria, the people who remained in the region of Samaria intermarried with the Assyrians and other outsiders. They learned foreign customs and worshipped strange gods. They built a temple to the True God on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria – one that rivaled the temple in Jerusalem.

By the time Jesus was traveling with his disciples, it had long been evident to the Judeans and Galileans that the Samaritans had lost their way. They warned each other to watch out for them and their bad influences. When Jesus left Judea to return to Galilee, he was doing something out of the ordinary by choosing to travel through Samaria rather than taking the usual route that avoided it.

Jesus is almost always depicted as a strong, confident man. At the beginning of this story, though, he showed his human vulnerability. He was hot and thirsty. He was at the well without the means to draw water out for himself.

The woman, too, was vulnerable. It appears she was an outsider even among the Samaritans. She didn't go to the well earlier when the other women would have been there.

Imagine her thoughts as she approached the well. "Oh no, there's someone there. I hope they might be somewhat friendly. Oh no, it's a man. Maybe he won't make any rude remarks. Maybe he'll ignore me. Oh no, it's a Jewish man. At least I know he won't have anything to do with me. I'll get my water as quickly as possible and leave."

When Jesus saw the woman coming to the well, he had three options: (1) He could tell her to leave. She was a Samaritan; he was a Jew. She was a woman; he was a man. In this situation, he had the authority to get rid of her. (2) He could choose to leave the well. If he didn't want to tell her to leave, he could walk away, remaining parched and tired. (3) He could stay. And talk to her. And teach her. And learn from her. He could stay and create community, create fellowship, create a relationship.

We know that Jesus chose option three. He asked the woman to draw water and give him a drink. The woman responded with amazement that a Jewish man would associate with a Samaritan woman, much less ask her to give him a drink. As the conversation progressed, it became obvious that Jesus wasn't talking about physical thirst and H₂O. He was talking about spiritual thirst and God's ability to quench it.

When the woman realized Jesus was talking about spiritual matters, she pointed out that the Samaritans worshipped God on Mt. Gerizim, but the Jewish people said that Jerusalem was the only place that anyone can worship. "Which is it?" she asked Jesus. She wanted him to pick a side and settle an old dispute.

But Jesus refused to engage in that debate. He wasn't interested in the culture war between the Samaritans and the Judeans. He was interested in a truth that was deeper than those dividing lines. He offered a different way. "The time is coming. In fact, it's here," he said, "when

true worshippers won't worship on the mountain or in Jerusalem. Instead, they'll worship in spirit and in truth, in any time and space."

Currently there are multiple debates within and between groups of Christians. Usually, both groups claim that Jesus is on their side. I can imagine Jesus refusing to engage in the debate. He continues to be uninterested in the culture wars many of us deem highly important. Instead, he continues to be interested in a truth that is deeper than dividing lines. The truth is that God loves the whole world. That Jesus came for everyone. That all are called to love God with all they are and to love their neighbor as much as they love themselves. Many of the details don't matter as much as we insist they do.

After this interaction with Jesus, the woman told all of her neighbors what Jesus did and said. Many Samaritans were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, the one they had been waiting for. They chose to become his followers. Jesus spread the good news by stretching the cultural norms.

In this story, the idea of living water becomes the answer to the question, "How can I worship God?" For this woman, having her spiritual needs met confirmed God's presence with her and changed how she interacted with other people.

Our bodies and our spirits rest in God's loving care. One way to visualize this connection is to imagine that each one of us has a heart-need, created in the image of God, that only a relationship with God and God's people can satisfy. Some of us try to fill the void with food; others with alcohol; others with sex or drugs or screens or work or ... you fill in the blank. Some of these are necessary to meet the physical needs we have as human beings, but they don't work as replacements for a relationship with God.

Together, the stories from Exodus and John suggest that both the provision of daily physical needs and the provision of spiritual awakening are evidence of God's loving presence. To fully experience God's love and abundant life, we need to be shaped by God. To be shaped by God, we need to be able to recognize and name our thirsts – those things that we need to be healthy emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically so we can love God, ourselves, and our neighbors.

To be shaped by God, we also need to recognize that other people are often the means by which God meets our needs. Moses took elders with him when he struck the rock to provide water to the Israelites. Jesus traveled with a group of disciples. Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman, and the woman spread the good news to others. It can be difficult to see God's grace on our own so God uses people in our community – our family, friends, and church – to help us claim this promise that we, also, will receive living water to quench our deepest thirst.

What are you thirsting for? What is our community thirsting for? Even if we're not always aware of it, we long for God, we thirst for God.

How has your spiritual thirst been satisfied? How much was the result of your work? How much was because of God's providence?

God hears our deepest cries. God's quenching love brings us life. That is the good news we claim. That is the good news we share. Thanks be to God. Amen.