

**Journey into Life: Living Water**  
**John 4:5-15**  
**March 15, 2020**

Israel's wandering in the wilderness was a hard and sometimes perilous journey toward the promised land. We too are invited on a journey with God through the ordinary times of our lives toward Easter and resurrection and new life. These admittedly are not ordinary times for us. And like Israel we too are hard pressed not to complain about all the restrictions this virus has placed on our lives. The song of Miriam has long since died in the desert wind; now they hear only the deathly silence of the wilderness. They arrive at Rephidim, but there is no water. They complain of thirst and ask why Moses has led them out of Egypt to die in this wilderness. Thirst has caused them to forget the triumph of the Exodus, the crossing of the sea, the gift of drinking water at Marah, the gift of mana and quails; their faith is threadbare.

Moses is instructed by God on how to resolve the dilemma. He takes his rod that had served to bring them out of Egypt and across the sea, and he is told to strike the rock. When he does water gushes out. Fresh running waters quench their thirst!

I suspect that we may feel a bit like these pilgrims today. We too can too easily forget all the blessings God has enriched our lives with. Today we feel that life has piled up challenges too heavy to bear. At times like these, for us individually and as a congregation, we can feel abandoned by God. But this story is a reminder of God's faithfulness. Let us listen to it again!

As I read our history, I realized that you have gone through several really challenging times, especially in the 70's. Like many congregations West Flamboro has experienced decline and sometimes profound conflict. Yet, in spite of that you have found healing and renewal. So here we are decades later perhaps still thirsty for God's Spirit. Even now we can feel some identity with the people of Israel and what it's like to be thirsty. But I see lots of positive signs of spiritual vitality in this community of faith: there is a deep sense of faith, joy in worship, and hope for our future. Yes, we are thirsty for God's Spirit and long for God's direction into our future.

Turning to another story about thirst and water we meet Jesus at Jacob's well. He is at the wrong place and at the wrong time. Samaria is not a fitting place for a Jew, and certainly the man from Nazareth should have known better. After all, it was well known that Jewish folk have no dealings with Samaritans and vice versa. Any self-respecting Jew would go out of his way to avoid touching the soil of these reprobate Samaritans. But Jesus has decided otherwise. And it is also the wrong time for it is high noon, and not a time to be out in the blazing heat at Jacob's well. But he is tired and sits beside the well. At that very moment a surprising visitor arrives. Normally the women from the village would all come together early in the cool of the day for their daily ration of water. Perhaps her solitary appearance at noon says something about her status in the community.

Equally surprising Jesus speaks to her, asking her for a drink. Again, proper social custom would dictate that a man never talks to a woman in public, and certainly not to a Samaritan woman. A wrong time, a wrong place and an improper conversation ought to grab our attention.

Jesus asks her for water. She is perplexed by this request from a stranger, and especially a Jew. Jesus responds with the promise of "living water". But, she notes, you don't have a bucket and it's a deep well. Where will you get "living water"? The water from this well, Jesus responds, doesn't quench our deep inner thirst. The water I'm offering does! Indeed, Jesus says: ***The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.***

Water in our story symbolizes spiritual life. We all drink from the different wells that material culture offers us. We are bombarded on every side with offers of alternatives to spiritual life: modern, secular society offers and endless array of alternatives to the religious life of the Spirit. In the midst of alternate universe of ideas on what constitutes the good life is the question posed by Jesus: what truly satisfies our deepest longings and spiritual thirst? Where will we find what we're looking for?

Jesus offers this lonely woman an opportunity to discover living water. I often wonder why people don't get it. I mean I wonder why they don't see through the fundamental lie of our Western obsession

with externals. But this woman didn't get it either. When Jesus mentions "living water" as something he can offer her, she resorts to a banal question about buckets. Our natural disposition is to stay at the material level. We find the challenge to spiritual birth and inner transformation too threatening. For Jesus, for Christians throughout the centuries since, spiritual life is a gift of the Holy Spirit, not a product manufactured by conventional wisdom or respectability.

Thirst is not something I have experienced very often in my life. But I do have one standout memory of thirst. My brother and I were hiking high up in the Scottish mountains. In those days, unlike today, few people carried around drinking flasks. It was unusually hot that day and we had not found a stream for hours. I remember my tongue feeling like leather. Suddenly we found a small stream running down the hillside and we drank as if our lives depended on it. I can still remember the refreshing feeling of life-giving water restoring me.

The question remains for us, as for this woman, what are you drinking to satisfy the inner spiritual thirst you were born with? Are you still thirsty after sampling just about all the wells available? Or perhaps you are still building bigger buckets in order to get more of the stuff that you hope will satisfy. Jesus reminds this woman:

***Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. (John 4:13ff)***

On the last day of the feast of Tabernacles Jesus makes a profound statement. The feast commemorates the forty years Israel wandered in the wilderness and lived in temporary shelters. When the temple stood there was a famous water drawing ceremony. For seven days the priests took a golden pitcher and led a musical procession to the pool of Siloam where he plunged the pitcher into the waters while reciting "Therefore, with joy you shall draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3). The pouring of the water symbolized the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and was followed by a great silence that descended on the sanctuary as the people reflected upon the Holy Spirit—the only true refreshment for their thirsty souls. On the last or

“great” day of the feast, the water libation rite reached its climax. The priests circled the altar seven times and then poured out the water with great pomp and ceremony. On the final and climactic day of the Feast, Jesus took his stand. He cried out: ***If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me this way, just as the Scripture says. (John 7:37)***

Ultimately Jesus will give up his life so that we might experience this gift of spiritual life. May God grant each of us faith and peace during these days of deep anxiety and fear. May we drink deeply at the well of God’s Spirit and anchor our lives in God’s care and love.

**AMEN**