

Living Water
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Texts: John 4:5-42; Exodus 17:1-7

[SLIDE #2]

Living Water Cliche In the 1990s sociologist Ray Oldenburg described third places. Not home (our first place), not work (our second place), but public spaces, third places--like coffee shops, bars, general stores and barbershops. Oldenburg believes these places are important for our well-being, and essential for democracy. Third places act as a leveler across different sectors of society and the main activity is conversation. These places are accessible and accommodating where people sometimes find a home away from home. Jesus intentionally visited third places such as hillsides, grainfields, fishing ports, crowded roads and once a community well. Worrying over the exclusivity of our churches, some missional Christians--instead of inviting folks to worship, are frequenting third places to simply be with others, become regulars, offer genuine relationship and see where the conversation leads. Perhaps, as at Jacob's well, living water can flow through third places in our world.

[SLIDE #3]

Some of us have heard this story so many times that living water is a cliché. But living water has a history. Two Hebrew prophets spoke of "living water"--Jeremiah and Zechariah. Jeremiah addresses the human problem of having false gods. In contrast to cracked and broken cisterns of false religion, the true God, says Jeremiah, is a fountain of living water.

***Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.
Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked,
be utterly desolate, says the Lord,
for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns that can hold no water.*** Jeremiah 2:11-13

The prophet Zechariah describes the day of the Lord like this: ***On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin. (Zech 13:1) On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem. (Zech 14:8)***

Living Water at Every Stage of Life

So Jesus offers living water--God's covenant love for a chosen people--to a Samaritan, a woman whose nation was a theological embarrassment to Jews. A woman who might or might not accept his offer and drink in the living water. But then as now, there are people of every nation, every faith tradition, every class, every walk of life who are thirsty for God.

[SLIDE #4]

According to church tradition, Lent is a good time to review these water stories. The Exodus passage about the Israelites receiving water from a rock says that God's people "journeyed by stages" (Ex17:1) This phrase--journeyed by stages--is actually a refrain in the wilderness stories. It reminds us that the wilderness is not monolithic and also that the stages of life and stages of faith that we experience over a lifetime change. Yet, the living water that God offers us through Jesus Christ is available at every stage of life.

[SLIDE #5]

No worry faith

From our Exodus passage we can identify different stages of faith. The first is what I call--**no worry faith**. This is a stage of faith in which one follows patterns and rules with trust and confidence. Faith leaders--whether parents, teachers, pastors or mentors--are seen as extensions of God's providence. This is a stage of security--like a child lovingly bonded to her parent. It's fitting that we sometimes call our faith ancestors children of Israel. They believe, obey, follow, receive. They act like children--complaining now and again, but when their basic needs of water and manna are met, they are soothed, content.

Another stage of faith we see in the Exodus story is what I'll call **dissatisfaction/resistance**. This kind of faith emerges when we don't get what we want, our patterns or rules break down, the imperfections of our leaders are exposed, and we lose patience with waiting on God. Now the children of Israel had a deposit of no worry faith. They had seen miracles. They'd been liberated by God. Like a mother, God fed them and they were satisfied. They equated Moses' provision with God's provision. But then life catches up with Israel and they grow dissatisfied. It's not that they have a bad attitude; these people are legitimately thirsty. They have no water. So they

resist Moses and entertain the bizarre idea that Moses is actually dead-set against them and has brought them into the wilderness to kill them off!

Dissatisfaction and resistance are legitimate stages of our faith journey, but our culture assumes that these are the goals and conclusion of our journey. The archetype of the well, though, is for coming back to ourselves, our true selves. That's why Hagar, Moses, Rebekah, and several others in scripture have major life transitions at the well. Beyond dissatisfaction and resistance is another stage of faith. After Moses strikes the rock and the water flows there is a question on the lips of Israel--***Is the Lord among us or not?*** This can be a question from the point of resistance. ***Is the Lord among us not--*** because the Lord doesn't seem to be doing what I want God to do?

[SLIDE #6]

But this can also become a question that leads to a stage of **seeking all over again**. ***Is the Lord among us or not--***because maybe God is not always who I expect, but among us nonetheless. OK, some of us like developmental models and maybe you're trying to categorize yourself or someone in your household. Listen, don't get too rigid about it. On the individual level and certainly at the congregational level we occupy multiple stages of faith at the same time. For example, we may have a **no worry faith** when it comes to prayer, believing that God is attentive to our concerns, however small or great. Yet, we may experience **dissatisfaction and resistance** when it comes to gathered worship. We're frustrated with forms and conformity. And again, at the same time, we may be **seeking all over again** when it comes to living out our faith in daily life or reading scripture.

[SLIDE #7]

There one more stage of faith in this Exodus story that I'll call **leadership and growth through challenges**. Moses strikes the rock with the staff he used in Egypt. The last time he whacked something with his staff, he struck water, the Nile River, turning the water into blood. It was frightening plague against the Egyptian Empire--God's rejection of slavery. Now, when Moses fears that these dissatisfied and complaining Israelites are going to stone him, God calls Moses to transform his use of the staff for a life-giving purpose. ***YHWH said to Moses: Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.***

Moses is a leader of a whole nation and this story marks one of his many challenges. Isn't it interesting that God invites him to work in very different way this time. The staff of prophetic judgment against Egypt's Empire, now becomes an instrument meeting one of humanity's basic needs. Water.

[SLIDE #8 Living Water]

Water in Iraq

The people of Qayyara, Iraq suffered for two years while their community was controlled by ISIS. They lost homes, and many people were put in prison, tortured or killed by the militant group. Since the town was liberated from ISIS in August 2016 Mennonite Central Committee has begun an emergency water project for 10,000 families. Forcing ISIS out, Iraqi and foreign military bombed parts of the city's water treatment plant. And as ISIS retreated they cut power lines in and lit oil wells on fire. Thousands of people were left without electricity or access to clean drinking water.

Since January, MCC began a three-month project provide access to enough clean water for the whole community. Through a local partner organization MCC provides fuel for the water pumping station, so that everyone has access on the public network. They also provide water purification. This month the UN Development Program will begin rebuilding the destroyed water treatment plant.

Kaitlin Heatwole, MCC Iraq program coordinator works with this partner organization. She says: "There have been constant waves of newly-displaced people every month for the past three years. Even though they lost their homes or their families, people who were displaced last year have become old news because there are more waves with more displaced people. So many lives have been turned upside down by the conflict in Iraq. Through MCC's work in Iraq, we are meeting needs that are not otherwise being addressed. Sometimes it's not very fancy, like filling a gap in fuel so that families have water, but it's what people need."

The Bible story of water from a rock is fancy--it's spectacular, miraculous. But our need for water--physical water for community health or living water for every stage of faith isn't fancy. It's ordinary. We are all thirsty.

[SLIDE #9]

Jesus made a detour one day into the disputed region of Samaria and encountered a woman at the public well. This woman at the well demonstrates cultural, historical and theological sophistication in this conversation. She is the one who draws attention to the gender and ethnic differences between herself and Jesus. ***How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria*** (v. 9)? She also knows the history of her literal well and the spiritual stream from which she drinks as she highlights differences between their respective faith traditions. The Samaritan introduces a key connection between her tradition and Jesus' tradition--the expected Messiah (v. 25). She has probably been through some of these stages of faith long before she meets Jesus. Yet, for all her sophistication she has not "arrived" in the life of faith. Her day-to-day life is disordered and she is thirsty. Perhaps she is **seeking all over again** at this point in her life. Of course, Jesus meets her right where she is...and is a companion for her growth and leadership. Ultimately, this Samaritan woman introduces Jesus to persons beyond his own people, Israel and help him share his message more broadly. She gives up her fear of being rejected for Lent and shares her hope.

Drink up

Anybody tired? Anybody thirsty? Jesus was tired too. Jesus was thirsty. Biblically speaking, this is how God "relates" to us. God came in the flesh, in Jesus Christ, and got tired and thirsty just like us. He asked a woman for a drink. The well where they met still exists today and more importantly the living water of which they spoke still flows today.

This morning we offer a drink of water, living water, to persons at every stage of faith. Jesus Christ has time to meet your need, to hear your story including the disappointments and your resistance. Jesus will challenge your assumptions, and if you desire it, Jesus can fill you with living water, equipping you for your life's purpose.

