

Living Water

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon William E. Scrivener at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, February 24, 2008

There's an old story about a man who brings his mule to a muleskinner, which is not someone who skins mules but one who breaks them so they can follow commands. The man tells him that this mule is particularly stubborn and will need extra attention. The first thing the muleskinner does is pick up a two by four and whack the mule across the head as hard as he can. This astonishes the man and he asks somewhat heatedly, "Why did you do that?" The muleskinner replies, "Well the first thing you have to do with a mule like this is get his attention."

In my family of origin I have always been known as someone with a hard head. I learned how to go my own way, and it took the experiential equivalent of getting whacked upside the head with a two by four to get my attention – that is, to make me really understand that I had to change. I suppose that's human nature to some degree. But all of us have had to make changes in our lives at different times. Our resistance to change may be a reality, but so is our capacity to assess our lives and let the evidence point us towards something new. Some of us may need a whack upside the head. Others of us are more amenable to reason. But whatever the path, I think most of us like to believe that we are capable of change when the need is there.

So what are we to make of the Israelites as we encounter them in today's OT lesson? How are we to understand their behavior? Now on the face of it, perhaps their anxiety about finding drinking water makes a lot of sense. You don't have to have been stranded in the wilderness to know that, when you begin to get really thirsty, it is an uncomfortable experience. In fact, after a while it can become pretty much all you can think about. Biologically this makes a lot of sense. We need water more than anything else – it's mostly what we're made of. So our brain is wired to make sure we take in enough, and it does so by fairly screaming at us – YOU'RE REALLY THIRSTY! GET WATER! So we can certainly understand, from a human point of view, that a continuing lack of water would be a big deal and a cause for considerable anxiety.

But we also have to look at this event in the context of what has gone before. It's not as if the Israelites have just found themselves plunked down in the middle of the desert. They have been through an incredible set of experiences. First, they have witnessed the hand of God at work as Moses contended with Pharaoh in Egypt. Plague upon plague, pools of blood, the whole lot. Then there is the dreadful miracle of the Passover – every Egyptian first-born killed, while all their children are spared. Then the escape and crossing of the Red Sea – a dry path found as the Egyptian army pursued furiously, then the waters overwhelming that army. Then, when hunger began to overtake them, God provides quail and manna, meat and bread enough to sustain them on the journey.

So we have to ask ourselves – what the heck is going on here? How can it be that, after all they have witnessed, after all they have been through, after all the miracles wrought

on their behalf, they lose heart so quickly. Here is how scripture sets it forth: **“They camped at Reph'idim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"**

But the question that might have been put to them was “How could you believe that God would abandon you at this point after all the wonderful and powerful things he has done just to get you this far?” If the situation were less dramatic and intense, we might almost hear it as comedy. God says, “I performed miracles on your behalf, I led you safely out of Egypt and destroyed Pharaoh’s army. I provided quail and manna in the wilderness so you would not go hungry.” And the people answer, “Yes, but what have you done for us lately?”

How are we to understand this? Shouldn’t all they had seen and experienced been the equivalent of getting hit upside the head with a two by four? Wouldn’t you expect that, after all this, God would have their complete attention? Why isn’t their reaction one of, “We are in a tough spot, but we will trust in God to provide, because God has been so faithful to us already?”

I think one way to look at this is to see it as a case study both in human nature and in the journey of faith. To begin with, we all like to think that we are objective people, who can evaluate the evidence of our senses and our experience and make rational judgments about things. So maybe we like to think that, had we been there, we would have remained faithful because all the evidence supports such a stance. Just like we might like to think that, had we been around Jesus during his earthly ministry, we would have understood what we were seeing and followed Jesus as the Messiah. And maybe we would have.

But evidence of this sort doesn’t stand on its own. It competes with other things: things like our anxieties, our insecurities, our preconceptions, our biases. We all know people who can never accept acts of kindness from another, because they are habitually predisposed to look for hidden motives. We all know people who expect life to disappoint them, no matter what good things come their way. For some, the glass is always half empty.

It’s also important to remember that, for all the amazing things the Israelites had seen and experienced, they also were coming out of a long history of slavery and oppression. Any group of people who have such a history are not likely to readily give up their hard-won habitual way of looking at the world. To do so would feel very risky. So it’s perhaps not as surprising as it might seem that these people continue to respond to each crisis with fear and skepticism.

What’s important to note is that God remains faithful. Water is provided. The thirst is assuaged. And the Israelites are able to move forward on that long, arduous journey

towards the Promised Land. There will continue to be many trials ahead of them. They will continue to contend with Moses and with God. But the journey will continue.

And that is part of the meaning of this story. The Israelites do not come to the Promised Land immediately. Their faith in God is not sealed forever once they are delivered from Egypt. They are on a journey. And part of that journey involves learning to know just who God is, learning how to trust God. As it has often been noted, faith is not a destination but a journey. We are on our own faith journeys. We are, at times, fearful, anxious, contentious, testing, unsure. That this is so is not, as some would believe, a sign of a lack of faith. Rather it is a sign of faith at work – stretching us, testing us, helping us to grow. It is a life long process. So it was with the Israelites.

But it also needs to be noted that there is a dimension of our faith that is not about testing and contending. For our faith can also be that place of calm, quiet and trust – a place where we know that God is God, that we are loved and that, as Julian of Norwich would have it, “All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.” Some of the parents I meet at Children’s are certainly going through the worst sorts of trials. Severe illness, catastrophic injury. And while many of them are people of faith, that faith certainly manifests itself in different ways. And I find myself particularly touched by those who, though they are certainly praying fervently for healing, are able to talk about a faith in God that transcends the fate of their child – those who can say, “God is with me no matter what.” Not that they don’t question God. Not that they don’t get angry with God. But their faith in God is not ultimately based on whether everything turns out all right with their child. Their faith is about feeling assured that God will provide what is needed.

It’s really another way of talking about having our thirst assuaged. This is what Jesus means in his conversation with the woman at the well. He is telling her, “You have to come to this well everyday, and you will always be thirsty. But if you ask me for the living water, which I can give you, you will never be thirsty again.” Now, as is typical with Jesus, he is operating at two levels here, and it’s no wonder the woman gets a bit confused. He, of course, is not talking about some magical H₂O – “drink it once and never be thirsty again.” And surely you can hardly blame someone who has to lug large jars to a well in the heat of the day in order to get a daily ration of water, for seeing an opportunity of being relieved of this burden.

But Jesus is talking about the living water, which is himself. To have faith in Jesus is to be relieved of the burdens that plague us. But these are not, as some try to claim, the burdens of physical calamity, illness, injury, poverty, oppression. To claim, along with a bumper sticker I once saw, that “With Jesus you never have a bad day” is simplistic and misses the point. I have known too many people of deep faith who have suffered the worst things that can befall someone to ever believe that faith is proof against calamity. If Jesus himself was not spared the cross, we can hardly expect, as his followers, that we will be rewarded with carefree lives.

But what, then, does drinking this water feel like? How is it that it should be something we would seek so fervently? Part of the answer may be found in looking at what actually happens with this woman in the conversation. Essentially, Jesus confronts her with the reality of her life. He says, “You have been divorced many times, and currently you are living with a man who is not your husband.” Harsh words - or so it would seem. Words implying judgment, maybe even condemnation. In a society where divorce is common, and alternate living arrangements unremarkable, it may be hard for us to appreciate how Jesus’ words might be heard.

But she doesn’t take it that way, it seems. Rather she admits the truth of what he is saying in her response, “Sir, I perceive you are a prophet.” She then engages him in a remarkable dialogue about the nature of faith that is worth another sermon. And then she goes off to tell her neighbors about this conversation and almost gleefully reports “He told me everything I ever did.” I imagine there are more than a few of us who might not be thrilled at the prospect of someone telling us everything we ever did, but she is. Why?

Because, I believe, in her conversation with Jesus she experienced not judgment, not condemnation, but acceptance. He knew her exactly for who she was, and yet he treated her with dignity and respect. And it seems that this was freeing for her. She had been exposed for the worst sort of person and yet was still accepted. What a relief that must have been. How like a refreshing glass of water in the heat of the day. A burden had been lifted and she was free.

That is the good news for us. During this Lenten season we are called into a time of penitence, a time when we look into our souls and see where we need to make amends. But though it is Lent, we do so always in the larger reality of Easter, of knowing that, no matter what we have done, no matter how far we have strayed, we stand accepted and loved by God. That is what each of us thirsts for. To be freed from the burden of our sins.

What I also know is that this isn’t easy. It’s still hard for us to trust, just as it was hard for the Israelites in the wilderness. But if you have ever had the experience of feeling truly forgiven and accepted, then you know something of the power of the living water. And anytime you have been forgiving and accepting of someone else, when they expected condemnation, then you have been a vessel for that water. In all cases, it is Christ, meeting us at the well, telling us all we have ever done, and loving us fully nonetheless.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN