

She comes in the middle of the day. Just one woman--out in the heat of the day-- to draw water. She comes in the heat, when no one would be around, because she does not want the stares, the comments behind her back. And she knows she will get them. In Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* Cassio says:

Reputation, reputation, reputation! Oh, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation!

The woman, drawing water at a well in the Samaritan town of Sychar, has lost her reputation.

The most direct route from Jerusalem and Judea to Galilee was through Samaria and so Jesus and his disciples arrive at the town of Sychar, known in the Old Testament as Hebron. Two unusual things happen: Jesus speaks to a woman of Samaria and the disciples go into a Samaritan village to buy food.

At the well, Jesus and the woman have an extended conversation. The woman wants to direct their conversation towards religion. She wants to know: What is the right place to worship? Jews believed that the Temple in Jerusalem was the right place; the Samaritans, who also descended from ancient Israel, believed that the right place to worship was at Mount Gerizim. They had once had a temple built upon the mountain. She wants to explore religion but Jesus wants to talk about her, he wants to explore her past. He asks for a drink and then begins to speak about both the woman and living water. He says to her: *If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you 'give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. (10)* Gradually she becomes aware that this man, a total stranger, is not just another visitor, not just another wonder worker, not just another one of those itinerant teachers. He has insight, a powerful and disarming insight.

And all of this unfolds at the well. Jesus says, *Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give will never be thirsty.* He goes on to proclaim: *The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*

This reminds me of Canticle 9, "the First Song of Isaiah," drawn from Isaiah 12 -- a canticle that we say often during Morning Prayer. It says in part:

*For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense,
and he will be my Savior.*

*Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing,
from the springs of salvation.*

And on that day you shall say,

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name.

Water gushing up to eternal life. Springs of salvation. Living water.

A poem of Wendell Berry comes to mind. It comes from his collection *Farming: A Handbook* and it begins *I was born in a drought year.* The character speaks of dryness and the fear of drought and of dust and then he concludes with these lines:

I love the water of wells and springs
and the taste of roofs in the water of cisterns.
I am a dry man whose mind is something of a cup.
My sweetness is to wake in the night
after days of dry heat, hearing the rain.

A few days ago, Joan and Jane and I sat in the office of Paul Ohlrogge, the UW Extension Agent whose official title is "Community Resource Development Agent" for Iowa County. We had a wonderful time learning about communities and their needs and especially learning about water.

Before our visit was over, both Joan and Jane knew that I was somehow going to work the idea of waters and wells into my sermon for today, and, given the women at the well talking to Jesus--why not?

We have a lot of ground water and water resources in Iowa county and were surprised to know that when the Extension did a needs assessment of the concerns for our rural community, water was number three. The first concern was broadband access. The second was preserving the rural character of our small towns and rural landscapes--a sense of place. The third was water. Jesus and the woman were standing at the well. He was talking about living water and she was about to draw a bucket of water from the well and he was about to drink it but I challenge you to find any place in Iowa county where on a random basis you or anyone else would walk up to a lake or a flowing stream with a bucket to get some water for a drink.

Paul Ohrogge gave us a folder entitled *Iowa County Where Water Matters*. In it I discovered that a meal of a quarter-pound hamburger with fries and a soda takes 1,400 gallons of water to produce. That's mostly the cow. Cows drink about 40 gallons a day. A gallon of gas takes six gallons of water. I learned that over one third of private wells in the state are estimated to have detectable levels of pesticides or a pesticide breakdown product. We have about 850,000 wells in Wisconsin.

Paul told us that water works its way down into the soil. While some bacteria may be filtered out by the soil, the ag chemicals and other chemicals persist, staying in the water. The water can travel quickly down into the soil until it hits a hard layer of rock, usually in our area limestone. Then it may travel horizontally and come out as a spring or as a water fall. At Governor Dodge State Park, the waterfall is a result of ground water traveling horizontally. Some water travels down into the earth slowly. It passes through another loose layer of rock and then comes up against another hard layer. The water that slowly works its way through that layer is termed "old water."

And so we have aquifers of old water, deep within the earth, pure and somewhat ancient water waiting deep within the earth, while above it, in the

superficial layers of the earth, we have new water and often water that is impure, potentially dangerous water.

As I thought of Jesus and the women at Jacob's well in Samaria, this image from our visit last Wednesday came to mind. Jesus is speaking of deep water, old water, pure water, spiritual water, living water. The woman is looking for surface water, new water, water close at hand that she can reach with a mere bucket.

In essence, Jesus tells the woman that she should be looking for something deeper and more profound than that water in the well. And we should too. He speaks to her of living water and by the end of the conversation she is filled with a strange sense of liberation. He tells her all about herself and her five husbands but at the end she is filled with this joy as she heads back into town. She heads towards the very people whom she wanted to avoid and proclaims *He told me everything I have ever done*. They ask him to stay and he stays for two days: Bringing water up from the depths of spiritual experience into a community that many would have avoided.

Old water. Deep water. I believe that such water resources run deep within us. Genesis tells us that God has created us in God's very image and that suggests to me that we have something of God buried deep within us, a powerful spiritual resource that God has given us in the midst of forming us and of brooding over our very identity. But this water resource is locked away. And part of the journey of Lent is to recognize what we have been given. Prayer, meditation, contemplation, the devotional use of holy Scripture, reflective writing all work to slow down our experience so that we might travel more slowly, and access that spiritual resource, that living water resource that is buried deep within us. And the Spirit of God waits to make that part of ourselves come alive.

The persona in Wendell Berry's poem proclaims *I am a dry man whose mind is something of a cup*. And you and I might understand. For often we are spiritually dry. But when we make our minds into cups, into receptive places, we possess the

opportunity to capture something of the depth that is both the gift of the Spirit around us and within us. I close with Isaiah:

*Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing,
from the springs of salvation.*

And on that day you shall say,

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name.

In the name of G-d, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.