

Meditation – The Risk of Religion
Scripture Reading – Exodus 17:1-6, John 4:3-26
Sunday, March 12, 2023
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On our journeys, we often encounter grace in unexpected places and people. Taken together, both lectionary readings for today challenge us to discern, in our own lives, the timeliness of God's presence and providence. Our first scripture reading is Exodus 17:1-7. This story opens with a curious dilemma. Though the Israelites faithfully journey as God commands into the wilderness, they come to a place with no water. How could they be sure that God was still with them? As the story unfolds, the Israelites experience God's providence anew. As is often the case for the people of Israel, their time of crisis leads to a new understanding and affirmation of God's presence. Hear now God's word as it is recorded in the Book of Exodus.

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, 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?" So, Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord 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 you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is John 4:3-26. Last week we read of Jesus' encounter with a devout Jewish leader, Nicodemus, in the darkness of the night. Today, we read about Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman in the light of day. Jesus' journey into Samaria took him to a region that devout Jews viewed as a "wilderness" devoid of true religion. Tired and thirsty, Jesus reaches beyond the cultural boundaries of his time. Hear now God's Holy Word.

...Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "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 will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Amen.

The title of the Meditation: "The Risk of Religion"

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, thank you for being a God who brings us beyond religion and into a relationship with you. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Religion is a risky business. One of the many risks of religion is taking the long way around to maintain a sense of religious purity. Palestine is a small country about 120 miles long running north and south. Galilee is the northern region and Judaea is the southern region with Samaria in the center. Jesus and his small band of followers leave Judaea for Galilee by way of Samaria. It was the most direct route; however, many devout Jews chose another route around Samaria, which took twice as long to avoid any contact with the despised Samaritans.

The hostility between the Jews and Samaritans dates to 720 BCE when the Assyrians invaded and subjugated the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Subsequently in the eyes of Judaic orthodoxy, the northern Israelites committed the unforgiveable sin---they intermarried with the Assyrians, lost their racial purity, and became known as the Samaritans who assumed the depraved status of "half breed." There were also theological differences between Samaritans and Jews about which books belonged in the Torah and where the center of worship should be as we read in the dialogue today.

As American Biblical Scholar Gail O'Day reminds us: *The preoccupation with protecting boundaries between the chosen and the despised peoples is not limited to the Samaritan and Jewish conflict of first century. Throughout human history, people and nations have defined themselves over against other groups. The history of race relations in the United States, the notion of racial purity that was at the ideological heart of Hitler's Germany, the ethnic wars that wax and wane across the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Europe all have their roots in the same fears; the fear of contamination, the fear of sharing one's gift and privilege with others.*

Jesus' journey that day through Samaria has symbolic, theological meaning. The Messiah comes not only to the chosen people, but also comes to embrace all people with whom he shares humanity, and to challenge the prejudice and elitism which are risks of religion.

As the woman approached the well at high noon, she was probably surprised to see anyone. In the middle of her routine, she hears this tired, gentle voice of Jesus say, "Give me a drink." This is not a simple social encounter. In this time and place an educated Rabbi (which Jesus was) would never speak to a woman in public, let alone a Samaritan. It was against the law to speak to one's sister or wife outside the home. However, Jesus never let social, gender, or racial discrimination come between him and another human being. He rose above the walls that organized religion had created in his day and he met people where they were.

What follows is a dialogue about "who has what to give," a healthy response from this woman who is stunned that a Jewish man has spoken to her in the light of day. Jesus talks metaphorically about the "living water from God" and she takes it literally, as did Nicodemus in the discussion about being "born again." Literalism is another risk of religion that prevents one from receiving strength and sustenance of the living and spiritual water offered by the Messiah.

The Samaritan woman journeys down yet another road in her misunderstanding of the living water Jesus offers. She mistakes the living water as freedom from the routine of her life. *"Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."* It sounds ironic to say it's human nature to want to escape our humanity, but it seems we do.

Yet, the same routines, from which we long to be freed, give our lives meaning and hope. Jesus meets us at different wells in the routine and stages of our lives. That is part of our humanity which Jesus affirmed when he became one of us.

The conversation becomes personal. Through the years these verses have been misinterpreted to exaggerate the Samaritan woman's promiscuity, another risk of religion. There are several ways to explain how she might have had several husbands without demeaning her integrity. For instance, her husbands could have divorced her (a privilege she did not share) or they could have died.

Finally, Jesus and the woman of Samaria enter a conversation about where one is to worship God. Another well-traveled road and risk of religion---intellectualizing in energetic debates that keep us at arm's length. At this point Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah which is perhaps the most intimate encounter recorded in the New Testament. Not only did the woman of Samaria feel understood on the well-travelled road of her routine, the One who understands her is the living water, the Alpha and Omega. In this encounter her thirst for God is quenched and she experiences love and acceptance. Another risk of religion is meeting the living Christ face to face when we least expect it and when we're not looking for it. The Samaritan woman finally understands what this beautiful human being offers: an invitation to accept and celebrate her humanity as a beloved child of God.

I'm sure this woman made many more trips to that well in her lifetime. Some days she was in a hurry or frustrated. Other days, she had a smile on her face and an appreciation in her heart for the joy of routine. However, she surely always remembered the day her Savior met her there and asked for a drink of water. Amen.