

Sermon – The Road Less Traveled  
Scripture Readings – Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:1-30  
Sunday, March 23, 2014  
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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.

*1 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. 2 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?" 3 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?" 4 So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5 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. 6 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. 7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"*

Our second scripture reading is John 4:1-30. During Ordinary time following Epiphany we spent several weeks in Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount. As we journey into the Season of Lent, Cycle A of the lectionary gives us the opportunity to spend time in John's gospel, whose language rich in metaphor and symbolism, is often mistakenly interpreted literally. 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.

*3 ...Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. 4 But he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9 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.) 10 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." 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who*

*drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 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." 15 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." 16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 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. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth." 25 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." 26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." 27 Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" 28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" 30 They left the city and were on their way to him.*

The title of the sermon: "The Road Less Traveled"

The Text: *A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' John 4:7*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, thank you for your encounter with this woman whom you draw out persistently and lovingly. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear...*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

One of the interpretations of Robert Frost's beloved poem "The Road Less Traveled" is that it was his independent spirit that helped him make the choice. It's a poem about taking chances

in life and not always following the "map." One never knows for sure which road to take because of opportunities that could be missed. There is no judgment from these paths, just lessons learned. These lessons and decisions that have to be made are what make us who we are. Choices always have a significant impact on one's life. (*Adapted from "A Road Less Taken" by Robert Frost Poem Analysis*)

This poem came to my mind as I reflected on today's gospel reading. Jesus didn't have to go through Samaria that day on "the road less traveled" although he chose to do so. It was the most direct route from Judea in the South of Palestine to Galilee in the North with Samaria in-between. However, many devout Jews chose another route around Samaria, which took twice as long. They did so to avoid any contact with the despised Samaritans.

The hostility between these two peoples had deep roots dating back to 720 BCE when the Northern kingdom of Samaria was captured and subjugated by the Assyrians. The Samaritans committed the unforgiveable sin---they intermarried with the Assyrians and lost their racial purity. 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. Through the years, the deep prejudice between these two peoples widened.

As Dr. 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 privileged call with others.*

And so "the road less traveled" by Jesus that day through Samaria has symbolic, theological meaning. The Messiah comes not only to the chosen people, the Messiah comes to embrace all people with whom he shares humanity and to challenge the prejudice and elitism that too often become the roads traveled by well-meaning people of faith.

As the woman approached the well at high noon, she was probably surprised to see anyone. In the middle of her routine, perhaps a bit pre-occupied as we tend to get in our routines, she hears this tired, gentle voice of Jesus saying, "Give me a drink."

We all know 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 or racial barriers come between him and another human being. He rose above the walls that organized religion had created in his day—and he met people as one human being to another.

What follows is a dialog about "who has what to give" which is probably a healthy response from this woman who is stunned that a Jewish man has spoken to her. 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 a road too often traveled by well-meaning people of faith that keeps one from entering into the depths of the living water offered by the Messiah.

The Samaritan woman journeys down yet another road in her misunderstanding of the meaning 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 its 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. Listen to May Sarton's reflection on routine: *I knew from having watched my father and the incredible amount of work he accomplished day by day and year by year, how supportive a routine is, how the spirit moves around freely in it as it does in a plain New England church. Routine is not a prison, but a way into freedom from time. The apparently measured time has immeasurable space within it...*

Jesus meets us at different wells in the routine and stages of our lives. When we're in middle school or high school, Jesus doesn't take away the anxiety of learning how to be a friend to others. When we're in college, Jesus doesn't take away the struggle of choosing between two roads and coming into our own. When we're married, Jesus doesn't take away the need for hard work, compromise and communication. When we have children Jesus doesn't take away the whiny nights, scraped knees and the challenges of parenting... and when we grow older Jesus doesn't take away the challenges and joys of the aging process. When we travel long days, we get tired and thirsty. We rest and are refreshed with a drink. 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 road too often traveled. There are several ways to explain how she might have had a number of 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 of religion---intellectualizing in energetic debates that keep us arm's length. At this point Jesus reveals himself to her as the Messiah. Perhaps this is the most intimate of encounters 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 understood her was the living water. She experienced the wideness of God's mercy and the kindness of God's affirming embrace, which she shared with her community inviting them to "come and see" for themselves.

I'm sure this woman made many more trips to that well in her lifetime. Some days she was in a hurry, frustrated; other days, she had with a smile and appreciation for the joy of routine. But always remembering the day her Savior met her there and asked for a drink. Amen.