

John 4: 5-42 The Woman at the Well

Water—it is such a crucial element for life—for physical life. Because of the country and culture we currently inhabit, we often overlook its essential nature; we take the availability of water for granted—until there is a drought. We rarely experience profound thirst physically. On the surface, both of the scriptures which I read this morning are about water—the water that quenches physical thirst. Having spent some time in the region where the Biblical narrative takes place I can appreciate how quickly one can become thirsty in that arid climate. The heat and the dryness of the air can swiftly cause dehydration. The Exodus passage begins “From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.” When considering the meaning of this passage, God’s presence as their guide is clear as we read the text. God, from the first has been directing the path of their journey. Here those fleeing Egypt into the wilderness seem to be greatly concerned about having drinking water; so much so that their thoughts lead them to angrily accuse Moses of bringing them out there to die of thirst. This is not the first time water has been an issue for them since they left Egypt. Previously they complained the water found on their journey was bitter. God then had Moses sweeten it for them. The next issue was food, and God provided manna. Instead of being thankful for their deliverance; instead of relaxing and trusting that God was going to provide for them, they again have become angry with Moses and question God saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” The cumulative effect of these wilderness narratives is to paint a certain picture of these newly freed slaves—that they are ungrateful whiners. How could they react like this after seeing God’s power demonstrated at the Red Sea, the sweetening of bitter water, the manna which comes nightly from heaven to feed them? What is wrong with them? That certainly seems to be Moses’ take on the situation as he goes to God with an angry complaint of his own. We view Moses’ complaint sympathetically. What we often fail to mention is the nature of God’s response to all this distrust, doubt, fear and the reframing of their past history in Egypt as being more desirable than their current situation. God doesn’t get angry. Instead God shows vast patience with their fears. In each case God’s answer to their complaint is to provide for their need. The Israelites were not questioning God’s existence, but were questioning the reliability of his presence in the details of their lives. The issue here is not so much the water as it is their faith. Faith, in the Biblical sense, is not cognitive assent to doctrinal formulations, but a living and active trust that makes it possible to take significant risks. For the Israelites, the risk was the journey in the wilderness. It would seem that during their journey so far, God has already answered their question about being present with them. Yet again and again they ask for reassurance. And, if we are honest with ourselves, we are the same way. What we really yearn for is not proof that God exists, but that God is present in the messy particulars of our lives. We ask again and again because we need to know again and again. Is God among us? Because it seems that God leads us in and out of scorching, shape-shifting deserts in our life’s journey—for reasons we often don’t understand. We ask “why, Lord?” when difficult things happen. And when that happens, the only question that matters is—is God among us or not? God’s provisions for this journey through the wilderness happen in unexpected ways. Moses gives this place a name, based not on the miracle of the water which flowed from the rock, but of Massah and Meribah which is based on the Israelites behavior—saying they had quarreled and tested the Lord. The people look around and see the absence of

water—the source of life. God chooses to bring water and the life it symbolizes and will impart—out of something that appears to be lifeless—a rock. This may be symbolic of God’s intentions to bring people life, not death. God finds ways to make life flow in unexpected ways. But it requires a certain amount of trust from people, a willingness to put faith in God who does not do things in the typical way. In some ways this episode in the desert was a mutual testing as God worked to shape the character of the people of the covenant to come. Even though the Israelites seem to have a memory problem, God is providing the manna daily, but only enough for the day and has again given them water to quench their thirst. God is working to teach trust to these people chosen to be a blessing to the world. God still desires our trust in the way to life which God has provided. God desires for us to know that whatever we may encounter on our life’s journey, we are not alone. We have times of doubt and desolation and wander through places full of pain, grief and loss. And in those times and places, we thirst. Our thirst is for hope, for healing and for the assurance that God is there with us. These wilderness places are terrible places to be, but it is wonderful to find while you are there that there is a source of living water which brings hope, healing and which satisfies beyond the physical. In the Exodus passage, the presence or absence of water can be viewed as the Israelites perception of God’s presence with them. In the gospel passage from John the encounter we find there is between Jesus, the ultimate expression of God with us, and a Samaritan woman who has come to the village well at an unusual time to draw water. This passage stands out for several reasons—one of which is the sheer length of the conversation which Jesus has with this woman—with whom he should not have even spoken according to the ruling norms of his day. Much of what is written about this exchange focuses on the boundaries of gender and ethnic prejudice which Jesus crosses with this conversation. John gives us a lot of details about this scene he is describing. It takes place in Samaria, where no faithful Jew would be found. Jesus is sitting by a well known as Jacob’s well, tired and worn out from his journey. He is alone as the disciples have left to purchase food. And we are even told that it is noon—not a time that people are out and about due to the heat of the day. Within John’s gospel it is not often that we see a glimpse of the man Jesus, but here Jesus initiates a conversation with the Samaritan woman who arrives at the well to draw a bucket of water. His first words to her are a request—he says “Give me a drink.” She seems rather taken aback by the request; she recognizes that Jesus is a Jew. She points out the accepted boundaries which separate their interaction: Jewish man, Samaritan woman. Jesus ignores her rebuff and initiates a second exchange. Jesus expands on his identity as more than a Jewish man when he tells her that if she knew who he was, she would have asked him for a drink. Although as he often does, Jesus speaks of himself in the third person, he tells her if she had known and asked, he would have given her “living water” As so often in John’s gospel, the text moves forward at two levels—the physical and the spiritual. The woman’s first response to this offer of “living water” is to understand it in the ordinary sense. According to the customs of the day ritual cleansing was done by immersion in “living water”, that is fresh, running water from a stream. Additionally, she points out that Jesus is sitting there without a bucket—so how could he presume to offer her water—who does he think he is—does he see himself greater than their ancestor Jacob who gave them the well? Jesus’ response is then to tell her that he can offer something better. The “living water” he offers is not like that which can be obtained from a spring or stream. That water is refreshing and desirable but it only quenches the physical thirst which will return. Jesus says, “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.” This water sounds so marvelous that the woman says to Jesus, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” She is still viewing what is being offered as water to quench her physical thirst. What Jesus is offering is the gift of himself. Jesus then shifts the conversation away from the offer of water, to the subject of the woman herself and her past. Jesus tells her to go and call her husband. In her response to this request, the woman responds that she doesn’t have a husband. Jesus then describes her marital history, and although many interpreters have used this to cast aspersions on her character—it is important for us to note that Jesus does not. In this narrative the woman does not speak of repentance. In this narrative Jesus does not speak of forgiveness. In Jesus’ words describing her marital history and present circumstances there is no condemnation for past or present sins, but recognition that she has lived a tragic and difficult life. A woman in that culture was property. She has been abandoned five times and now is dependent upon someone who will not marry her. She is in desperate straits. Rather than ignore her, critique, or pity her—Jesus has chosen to ignore her gender, her ethnicity and her current life status. Jesus recognizes and names her challenges. He sees her and values her. In doing so, he conveys to her that she exists for him. She is not invisible. She has value and worth. Because of his seeing her as she is, she is emboldened to ask the question that has divided Jews and Samaritans for years—where is the proper place for worship. Jesus’ answer is an invitation to realize that the place of worship whether in Samaria or in Jerusalem is not what matters. Where worship occurs doesn’t matter if the worship is not in spirit and in truth. At this point Jesus proclaims that he is the Messiah, using the same phrase with which God spoke to Moses from the burning bush: I AM. Jesus is inviting this Samaritan woman to see who he is and to respond; to leave her burdens behind her and share with others the joy she has found in their meeting. She does go and share what she has experienced and many others came to see who Jesus was. These invitations embedded in the narrative are surprising in that they come from a man to a woman, a Jew to a Samaritan, and a rabbi of relative power and authority to someone who had neither. They are also surprising because each invitation also involves a challenge—a choice, if you will—to get over one’s piety as an excuse for keep a distance from God; the challenge of accepting the new identity Jesus offered; the challenge of imagining that God could and would use her to share the good news. In response to what she has learned from this encounter, this woman leaves her jar behind and goes out to her neighbors whom she has previously avoided. She brings them to Jesus. All of these things are risky, but in almost every way she is now a completely different person—the person God had created her to be but had trouble embracing because of the difficulties in her life. The invitations given to her are also given to us: To truly see each other. To take seriously the gifts, worth and potential of others. And our response to these invitations—the choices we make—can lead us to greater faith, love and service as we continue our journey of discipleship. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.