

Thirst Quenching

There are so many commercials on both TV and radio trying to convince us that a particular product is especially good at quenching thirst. The market competition for these products is intense. Yet there are many places in our world where thirst quenching in the literal sense is still a major concern...resembling the situations found in our texts today where obtaining water, especially clean water is a major issue for people. In the Middle East the Israeli government shuts of the water supply to Gaza and other West Bank villages on a routine basis. However, because of the climate change which has caused record droughts in some area of the US water shortages loom large as reservoirs shrink. In fact, the ability to have clean uncontaminated drinking water has become an issue in some places in our country...like Flint Michigan whose water supply was contaminated by lead, by Jackson, Mississippi's water system inability to supply water to all its communities, and recently the concerns about toxic substances in the ground water in East Palestine Ohio following that train derailment. Thinking about these issues which still exist abound being able to quench thirst reminds us how essential water is to our survival. In the Hebrew Scripture those who escaped Egypt have been in that wilderness for a while now. This text is not the first time that this same issue has arisen. This narrative with the name Exodus is about Israel's history, about the formation of a nation from a motley group of descendants from Abraham's grandson Jacob who have lived and intermarried in Egypt for a few generations; folks who have cried out to Abraham's God seeking aid. And God has answered them by sending Moses to liberate them and lead them to that land promised to Abraham. Yet the recurring question which they are asking is one which defines the process: "Is God with us or not?" That is the question underlying all their complaining...when they look around and see wilderness, despite God's provision of them with water earlier, with the morning and evening provision of food...if they don't see the provision...they have no trust that the provision will come. As we read this passage we often view them in an unfavorable light thinking with the introduction verse: "been there, done that" they should know better than to doubt God. The people feel they are dying of thirst. People can survive longer without food than without water so a lack of water makes the complaint valid. Moses who has just been the "means of grace" through which God has delivered them from slavery, fed them with manna and quails—yet they turn on Moses showing a lack of faith or perhaps it could be named hard-heartedness or ingratitude, or stiff neckedness or fear which is the term the text uses. Whatever name is used it is an aspect of the human of the human condition which frequently appears. In this text both the people and Moses seem to be experiencing a crises of a life and death. Both Moses and the people issue complaints to God about the situation. As they face the situation we should note how crises situations cause the breakdown of community; this occurs frequently as today we can see how fear causes neighbor to turn against one another. The people demand water and despite what they have experienced as that key question: Is the Lord among us or not? God's response is gracious. God does not respond to their characteristic lack of trust but provides for them. God does not condemn the grumbling Hebrews but compassionately demonstrated presence with them through the provision of water. God demonstrates God's presence with them. In Exodus 17 God's provision of water come in an unexpected manner. Moses is sent with the elders to move out in front to go to a rock where God will be waiting. Once there he is to strike the rock with the same staff he used

to part the waters of the Nile. Water then comes out of that rock to satisfy the people's thirst. This is often presented as "magic", yet water can often be found flowing through rocks if one knows where to look. God has given Moses very specific direction. It is not magic but God's guidance and use of Moses as the agent to supply the need. Perhaps we need to rethink this understanding. Perhaps this story is not really about proof of the presence of YHWH at all. Perhaps it is about the fears and dangers of freedom, the terror of leadership of people who cannot and will not trust you as a leader, this on-going doubts about whether or not God is with us so we make demands to be given a unexplainable "miracle" to alley our fears. Yet one person's miracle is another's plain event. These things do not provide rock-solid proof of the presence of God because we continually allow fear to create doubt. Waiting for something like water to pour from a rock in a desert without water is a sort of atheism. If without such proofs we simply will not believe, then we are placing trust not in God but in unexplainable acts that may or may not have divine origin. My faith is in God, as Paul states it, because whether we live or die, we are God's. My belief that God is present comes because I know that without that presence, I can finally do nothing of lasting value or significance for the justice of God's world. Period. The final question of this text is that same "Is God with us or not?" In our day and age that question has become ever more insistent through the questioning of all authority, all tradition, all previous certainties. And in the light of these things we too want to demand a sign. We actually need to keep asking this question. The answer often is not a simple yes or no. The answer is the question itself that we must continue to ask because we need to check whether or not our path is conforming to living the ancient truth that God is here, that God still calls people to follow the narrow way. The proof finally lies in seeing people offering themselves for others, when people are witnessing with acts of courage which transcend the self and offer love and grace to others. The stories found about Israel in the desert are profoundly theological and ask their successors, and us, just how we know whether YHWH is with us or not? Can we know only if God satisfies our every need, answers immediately our every whim? In chapter 32 the Israelites gave a negative answer to the question by having Aaron make them a golden calf and proclaimed it the one who brought them out of Egypt. We need to examine carefully if we have our own molten calves instead of following and obeying the God who calls us to love, to care and to bring about justice in our communities. In many ways this story about thirst revolves around a sense of identity—of being confident in God's claim upon us so that as Jesus promised the water provided will satisfy thirst once and for all. The theme of water obviously connects both readings this morning; the theme of identify as God's claimed also flows through both texts. This gospel text from John 4 is another one that is unique in John's gospel. It is also records the longest conversation that Jesus has with someone in all of the gospel accounts. In this story Jesus overcomes exclusiveness and builds community through inclusiveness. The first 4 verses of this chapter tells us Jesus has been in Judah and because of Herod's actions he decides to go back to Galilee, and choses to go through Samaria rather than the longer route which would avoid the Gentile area. The hostility and distrust between the Jewish and Samaritan people began long ago but the prejudice remains. As a Jewish male Jesus is in a position of advantage over a woman, but as a thirsty and tired traveler, an alien to the area, he is at a disadvantage and does not even have a bucket to draw water to quench his thirst. The woman is initially surprised to be addressed by this foreigner belonging to a group hostile to Samaritans who additionally crosses the gender barrier to interactions.

Jesus' invites the dialogue to begin by asking her for water allowing her the chance to exercise some power over him as she has the bucket. The scene is paradoxical. Here is the giver of living water, thirsty himself. During the conversation, and after a play on words the meaning of living water, Jesus moves beyond his own Jewish cultic tradition by affirming that YHWH is best worshiped in Spirit. Thus he does away with the importance of both the temple in Jerusalem and the Samaritan center of worship on Mount Gerizim. During the ensuing conversation after a play on words on the meaning of living water which is water that flows...moves...is not still...Jesus offers this unnamed woman the gift of living water. In addition to the gender issue the passage's details about the woman's life presents a third disadvantage besides race and gender to her belonging among those receiving the living water. It is disclosed that she has had five husbands and is living with a man who is not her husband. Although this is often presented in a very negative that was not necessarily the case. Considering levirate marriages requiring a childless widow to marry her husband brother or that a man could divorce a wife for no cause by simply publically declaring his intent, this woman could easily been marginalized from the community through no fault of her own. Jesus could easily be acknowledging her personal history which has led her to avoid the normal gathering times at the well. Jesus frequently builds community by crossing racial boundaries and breaking the distinction between "chosen people" and "rejected people." At this well this unnamed woman's conversation demonstrates a grasp of the theological claims Jesus makes in his offer of the gift of living water which quenches thirst permanently...she accepts the offer and becomes so excited about what is offered she runs back into her community to witness to Jesus' presence among them testifying she has encountered the awaited Messiah of God. In fact, she is so excited she leaves her water jar at the well. Her witness is powerful and leads to the whole village coming and accepting what Jesus offers. This high noon encounter with an unnamed foreign woman comes directly after the encounter the Pharisee Nicodemus seeks by coming to Jesus at night with his questions about Jesus' identity. Nicodemus struggles with the concept of being born from above taking the statement too literally and not seeing that God's presence comes through the movement of the spirit. These two encounters were with very different people in almost all ways. Both present a question for them to answer about their identity and their ability to trust that God is present and inviting them into a relationship and giving a mission to proclaim that presence. God is always present and never stops issuing the invitation for us to see that presence more clearly and trust in the promise made so long ago to go with us through the wildernesses of our lives. Thanks be to God.