

“Bumps in the Journey”
Exodus 17:1-7 & John 4:5-42
3rd Sunday in Lent – February 27, 2005
Sermon by Jan Edmiston

Jesus had some memorable conversations with various individuals in the Gospels. Think back and maybe you can remember some of them.

Jesus talked with Peter about leadership in the church. Jesus talked with Nicodemus about being born again. He talked with the sisters Mary and Martha about matters of life and death. But the longest conversation Jesus ever had – as recorded in Scripture – was his conversation with a foreign woman at a water well in Samaria in the middle of the day.

The village well was, in *ancient* times, what Starbucks is in *our* time. It was more than a place to have your thirst satisfied; it was a place where you would meet strangers and friends. You might meet your future partner there. (This is where Jacob and Rachel met in the Old Testament.¹) You might conduct some business there. Or you might even meet a stranger who changes your life.

The first thing you do in Starbucks, or course, is to place your order for a drink. And this is what happened at the well too.

Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink and then they clarified exactly what was available: there was *ordinary water* for basic thirst, and then there was a different kind of water that *gushed up from a spring for eternal life* that Jesus happened to bring along with him.

Jesus was thirsty for the first kind of water. The Samaritan woman was thirsty for the second kind, even though *she wasn't sure it was really available*.

And then they moved on to a different conversation, a conversation about her spiritual life.

Part of our spiritual journey involves *bumps in the road* – those times when things are not good, when we are sick or frustrated or hardened or suffering or weak or so thirsty for *a spiritual spring gushing up with something eternal* that we have forgotten that such a spring is even available.

In the Old Testament lesson we heard this morning about the children of Israel – going by stages through a journey that would take them from place to place for 40 years on their way to the Promised Land – we have a good example of those *bumps along the journey*.

¹ Genesis 29:9.

God had miraculously saved them from the Egyptians. But how quickly they had forgotten. There had been a Divine Power that had set them free, but now – trudging through the wilderness – they weren't even sure that God existed. They demanded a sign that God was still with them.

They fussed. They quarreled. They whined like children in the back seat of the mini-van wondering *why they weren't there yet*. How long was this trip going to take?

And like any parent or tour guide reaching his last nerve, Moses cried out to the Lord: God, help me!

What shall I do with these people?

And once again, God provided water. The people should have been ashamed of themselves but they didn't even realize their shame. God had given them everything. Of course, God wouldn't let them die of thirst in the wilderness after bringing them this far.

But the congregation doubted God's love and they were making moves to take matters into their own hands. Maybe they could kill Moses and go back to the very people who abused them. *At least in Egypt there was a little water! At least in Egypt, they knew what to expect!*

The Samaritan woman was not completely aware that she was in a spiritual gully herself. The fact that she had come to the well in the middle of the day showed that she had at least a little awareness that there was something going on in her life that needed to be changed. Something dishonorable.

No one would fetch water for her household or her animals *at noon* when the sun was sweltering and everybody had retreated into their homes to avoid the heat of the day. But this woman had come at noon. Clearly she was avoiding the crowds. She was avoiding *something*.

Jesus would have been hot too. Normally, he might have taken refuge under a shady tree in the heat of the day. But he was looking for her. He was actually *sitting by the well*,² tired – waiting for her. Maybe he knew that, sooner or later, this woman would come to join him there.

There was once a time when people who had done something shameful avoided the crowds. Today, they write books about it. They hold press conferences. They become bigger celebrities than they were before – Martha Stewart, Jose Canseco, Paris Hilton, Ron Artest.

² John 4:6.

But at least in these Biblical times, people avoided attention. The woman at the well realized that something was amiss or she would not have come to the well at noon. And Jesus knew what that something was: this woman had gone from boyfriend to boyfriend to boyfriend – none of them lasting relationships. And especially in this ancient culture, each of those relationships further ruined her reputation and her ability to live a whole, satisfying life.

Notice that Jesus doesn't judge her. He doesn't accuse her of anything. He simply points out the reality of her life and shows her that *there can be a different way*.

One of our problems is that we haven't even noticed that we should be ashamed of ourselves. We see other people's shame. But we can't see our own.

I've shared the story before about the family with young children who always came late to worship many years ago. Every Sunday, I'd see them file in just after the Prayer of Confession, and take their seats in time to sing the "Gloria." As the mother of young children myself at the time, I commented to the father at coffee hour, that I could relate to how hard it is to get everybody out of the house on a Sunday morning. "Oh we intentionally come late every week," he said. "We don't want to be here for the Prayer of Confession, because we don't want our children growing up believing that they have anything to confess."

I was shocked by this. But actually, this is the attitude many of us have. We don't think we have a whole lot to confess. Sure, if we've done something heinous, if we've clearly made choices that could land us in prison then we might have something to say to God during that time of silent confession. But *most of us have a hard time thinking of something we have done that we should be ashamed of*.

It doesn't take much imagination to come up with a list of shameful deeds, though, that many of us commit every day: We tell other people's secrets. We spread gossip. We take more from our families than we give. We judge people who don't see the world the way we see it – call them ignorant or uncultured or simply "bad."

We flirt with other people's partners. We skim off a little money, a little time and hope no one finds out. We deceive ourselves and the people we love in tiny deceptions that might not rock the house, but they whittle away at trust and confidence. Maybe *we* should be ashamed of ourselves and we don't even realize it.

Like the Israelites who had been given a miraculous gift from God and then shamelessly complained in the wilderness, maybe we are too immature – spiritually – to realize our blessings. And then we have the gall to complain that we want more.

Remember, too, that Jesus was on a journey. We believe that he was actually the one person with nothing to confess. He perfectly obeyed God throughout his life. But even so, his own spiritual journey would take him to a place of shame and torture. Not merely a bump in the road, but an excruciating, horrific episode of agony.

One scholar, in talking about this story of Jesus and the woman at the well, says that it is almost “unbearably ironic” that Jesus – the Keeper of Living Waters – would one day hang from a cross and whisper “I thirst” to the Roman authorities, who would give him only vinegar to drink.³

If we find ourselves in some kind of spiritual pain . . . if we find ourselves hungry or thirsty for something eternal . . . Jesus has something to offer us. Even though he knows everything we’ve ever done and I mean EVERYTHING – even those things we pray nobody finds out – he still offers us *something that can quench our souls*.

Jesus is waiting for us, waiting to have an encounter with us in which he might begin by pointing out the things we need to change about our lives. And in the almost unbearably joyful moment when we realize exactly who we are dealing with and how much we are loved in spite of our past, we might discover the urge to invite Jesus to stay.

We might hear about Jesus encounters with other people, and even be moved by those stories. But it is when we have our own personal encounter with Jesus – the One we’ve been waiting for – that the bumps in our own spiritual journeys are smoothed out. And we can move on.

Keep in mind that, as we move closer and closer to Easter, we are also moving closer to that point in Jesus’ spiritual journey when he would be thirsty and his killers would give him only sour wine on a sponge to drink. Jesus drank it, we are told.

But we are also told that when that when it was over, and he was pierced with a sword, out flowed blood – and water. One of the mysteries of our faith is that *this death* made it possible for us to overcome any death we might encounter, any bumps in *our own journeys* however painful.

We can complain and make demands that we want to go back to where we started.

Or we can meet Jesus by the well and receive something that quenches us forever.

Let us pray: We come to you Lord longing for something glorious that might change things. Fill us with your spirit and your truth, so that whatever we are facing, whatever we are worried about, whatever disturbs our souls might be washed in holy, healing waters, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

³ Richard Lischer, preaching professor at Duke Divinity School reminds us of this in his sermon “Strangers in the Night.” In John 19:28 Jesus says, “I am thirsty.”

