

**March 8, 2023—The Third Sunday in Lent**  
**The Rev. James Wyatt**

## **Thirsty**

Whew, that long reading made me thirsty!

I got thinking this week about all the ways that companies who make soft drinks and bottled water and other beverages try to sell us things to drink, from catchy slogans like “Obey Your Thirst” to the singing toilets during the Super Bowl this year reminding us to stay hydrated. We live in a pretty different world than the one in which a thirsty Jesus sat down by a well and asked a Samaritan woman to get him a drink.

But is it really that different? The reality is that watering holes, so to speak—places where people go to get something to drink, from wells to bars to coffee shops—have always been places where people meet each other. In fact, they’ve always been places where people meet potential partners, going all the way back to the book of Genesis. When Abraham sent his servant to find a bride for his son Isaac, the servant met Rebekah at a well and arranged a happy marriage from there. Then Isaac’s son Jacob—the same Jacob who gave this plot of land in Samaria to his son Joseph, according to our Gospel reading—he met his wife Rachel at a well, too. And Moses first encountered his wife, Zipporah, at a well, being harassed by Egyptians. I just got a picture in my head of Moses sidling up to Zipporah and saying, “Are these guys bothering you? Here, let me buy you a drink.” Humans have been hooking up at watering holes for thousands and thousands of years.

I think that’s why the disciples react with surprise when they come back to the well where they left Jesus to go get food and find him talking to a woman there. Like, “Wait, have we just walked in on the beginning of a romantic comedy? That is not the kind of story we thought we were in.” In fact, I think the woman herself might have a similar moment of surprise as she’s talking to Jesus about water and he suddenly asks about her husband.

Really, I think the Gospel of John is playing with our expectations, here. No, this isn’t the beginning of a romantic comedy, but it’s meant to remind us of stories like the ones about how Jacob and Moses met their wives. It’s meant to remind us for the third time in these first four chapters of John, that Jesus is the bridegroom and his followers, his disciples, his church are collectively the bride, and his ministry is a celebratory wedding feast to which all are invited.

Are you thirsty? Thirst is a pretty fundamental human experience, and that makes it also a powerful metaphor. I imagine that’s particularly true in a hot and dry climate like much of the Middle East. But none of us are immune to thirst, so all of us, I expect, can relate when the Psalms say things like, “My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water,” (Psalm 63:1) or “I spread out my hands to you; my soul gasps to you like a thirsty land.” (Psalm 143:6) And it’s not too hard imagine the joy in hearing the words of Isaiah, “Hear, everyone who thirsts; come to the waters,” (Isaiah 55:1) or the words of Revelation, “To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” (Revelation 21:6) Just as God provided water for the Israelites in the wilderness as they fled from Egypt, so God provides the water of life to satisfy the thirsty in the new creation at the end of all things. From start to finish, the Bible presents God as the one who can satisfy all our thirst.

What are you thirsty for? Are you thirsty for peace—in the world or in your family or in your own heart? Are you thirsty for justice, for the wicked to get what they deserve or the oppressed to get a fair shake? Are you thirsty for healing? For a little taste of hope? For a good night’s sleep? For strength to make it through the day? You can hear the Samaritan woman’s thirst when she says, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” She sounds tired, doesn’t she? Worn out from her day-to-day tasks and thirsty for some rest.

And that’s when Jesus starts talking about husbands. It almost sounds for a moment like he’s trying to get rid of her, put an end to this conversation, send her off to bring back a man he can talk to. But no, clearly Jesus knows that she has no husband, and he happily

continues the conversation after demonstrating his divine insight into this woman's life. So that brings me back to the metaphor of Jesus as bridegroom. The woman says, "Give me this water," and Jesus responds, "Go, call your husband, and come back." Because her husband—not the man she's with now, not one of the five who died or divorced her, but her real husband, the bridegroom of her soul—Jesus is the living water she's asking for.

Let me be very clear about that: we hear "five husbands" and raise our eyebrows, and many preachers over the years have suggested or said outright that she was some kind of "five-time loser," or worse. But that was not a situation that she had any power over. She couldn't initiate a divorce. So either her husbands did or they died, and left her with no means of support in the patriarchal world she lived in. But there is no question here of her morality. Jesus passes no judgment on her. So we have no business doing so.

In fact, although the Gospel of John doesn't tell us this woman's name, there are later stories about her, including one that says that Jesus' disciples baptized her on the first Pentecost and gave her the name Photini, which means "the enlightened one." In Russian she's called Svetlana, which means the same thing. In the Orthodox church, she's celebrated as an evangelist and called "Equal to the Apostles," because of the way she responds to this encounter with Jesus, by sharing her story with others. When the disciples come back with food for Jesus and wonder why they've suddenly found themselves in the middle of a rom-com, she leaves her water jar and returns to the city, where she invites everyone to "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" "Many Samaritans from that city believed in [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony," John tells us, and they came to him and asked Jesus to abide with them. And he did.

I have said before and will probably say again that the word translated here as "stay" is a pretty special word in the Gospel of John. Over and over in this Gospel, Jesus tells us to abide in him as he abides in us. That's what discipleship is, that's what eternal life is. Jesus abides in us like a fountain of fresh water bubbling up with life to satisfy every thirst. And we abide in him, like branches on a vine, drawing from that living water to grow and thrive and bear fruit in our lives.

And then, most beautifully, after Jesus has come to abide with them for two days, the Samaritans from that city could say, We trust in Jesus, we rely on him—no longer just because of the testimony we heard, but because "we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." It is one thing—and a good and joyful thing!—to believe, to trust, to rely on Jesus because of what other people have told us. And it is a whole other, wonderful thing to trust in Jesus because of our own encounter with him, what we have seen and heard for ourselves, the relationship we have established with him. That relationship is about abiding in him, and him abiding in you. It's about the kind of intimate connection suggested by the metaphor of bridegroom and bride, the deep familiarity of people who know and love each other well. It's about the transformation that happens when we steep ourselves in God, in love, in prayer and contemplation.

Are you thirsty? Because that, friends, is the living water that will satisfy all your thirst.

Will you pray with me? This is the collect for the feast of St. Photini, which we observe on February 26. God be with you.

O Almighty God, whose most blessed Son revealed to the Samaritan woman that he is indeed the Christ the Savior of the World; Grant us to drink of the well that springs up to everlasting life that we may worship you in spirit and in truth through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.