

## *Satisfying the Thirst*

Exodus 17: 1-7

John 4: 5-26

Satisfying or quenching your thirst is the promise of every summertime beverage. As temperatures edge above 85 degrees, even in mid-March, you might have already begun sampling your favorite thirst satisfier before summer arrives.

I found an article online that offers 91 of "the best drink recipes to sip on to cool down and relax on a scorching hot summer day." Interestingly, many of them involved or at least suggested the introduction of an alcohol product to make them *really* good. However, some of them didn't seem that they would satisfy my thirst.

There was the "Midwest Mary." It says: *In the Midwest, Bloody Marys garnished with meats, cheeses, and veggies are works of art. My beverage has skewers of bratwurst, cheese curds and dill pickles.* It sounds like a meal, not a thirst satisfying drink.

I'm not big on spices, but a "Peach Basil Cooler" or a "Grilled Lemon and Thyme Lemonade" don't sound like something I want to try. The "Beer Margarita" also sounded a bit suspect.

Frankly, simple ice water is probably the best at satisfying thirst and cooling someone down. It may not have a lot of pizzazz and certainly lacks alcoholic content, but it is restorative to the body that is in need of some hydration. Things simply work better with water.

As we learn in our scripture selections, thirst is not simply the physical alert that tells us that we need to take in some water. It can also function metaphorically as a life alert to a need, a lack, or an emptiness that is being experienced. It may have been a condition with which we had grown accustomed, but something may come along to raise its priority and bring it to the forefront of our awareness, demanding to be addressed ... **now!**

In Exodus 17, God's people are moving through the desert at God's command. They come to Rephidim and there isn't any water. They complain to Moses: *Give us water!* It sounds a bit testy, but let's give God's people a break. They've been hoofin' it all day in the desert heat, and their campsite doesn't have any water. It all sounds legitimate. They want water and go to Moses with their issue.

The thing is that this isn't their first day in the desert, or the second, or the third. They've been sojourning in the desert wilderness for a while. And water wasn't the only thing that they ever needed and asked for.

They actually have developed a track record of needs, and every single time, God has provided for them. This issue over water was one of their first issues. After traveling three days, they came to an oasis at Marah (15:27ff) only to discover that the water was

foul. Moses followed God's instruction and threw a designated piece of wood into the water and purified it. How? I don't know and don't ask.

Then came the manna and quail (16:1ff); you know that story. God provided and showed that God's people should have no immediate physical needs that aren't being met.

Still, God's people have taken a surprisingly quarrelsome attitude with Moses. As in the scene in the Desert of Sin when God would ultimately provide manna and quail, so God's people are again crying out here: *Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?* They had a knack for drama, and frankly they seem to be milking it. This hysteria made an impression on Moses who takes up the dramatic tone right along with them as he declares to God, *What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.* Really, Moses?

God tells Moses what to do and brings forth water by striking a rock with his staff. End of problem. It answers the question at the end of the passage, *Is the Lord among us or not?* Answer: Yes, silly. It answered a question that need **not** have been asked since God's people in the desert had been dining on manna and quail for a while by now. Water should never have been an issue. God provides.

We should consider that God's people were indeed developing a thirst, but not exactly a thirst for water. It's hard to put one's finger on exactly what they're seeking, but I think the best understanding comes from the last statement which indicates their real question: *Is the Lord with us or not?* This seems to reflect a nagging concern of the Israelites, that God is simply not going to be there one day. Moses is a great guy and all, but when they need something, Moses has to get God to provide it. Moses isn't doing any magic tricks on his own.

God's people are realizing their dependence on God as long as they're traveling in the desert. Even though they have no unmet needs in the desert, they're pretty upset that they can't simply take care of themselves like they had always done before. It explains their hostility, and their whiny, over-wrought refrain about being brought into the desert to die. This is not a situation into which they would have put themselves otherwise. Liberation is great, but did they exchange one master for another?

Yes, they did change masters, and they're very different masters between Pharaoh and God. With God, there's a future, while with Pharaoh, there wasn't. Coming to know the terms of this new Master would take some time. Their situation in the desert is an example of needing a huge dose of faith in God. That would come as they experienced God's presence in even more ways. For now, there is a thirst for understanding who God is and the new life promise that God's people have gained. Water won't quench that thirst, but their experience of God will ... well, for the most part.

In the other reading from John's gospel, water also figures into the story. Jesus has gone into Samaria for some reason, a locale uncommon from his other paths. Jesus rests at the site of Jacob's Well at the sixth hour, or 12 noon. Then he does something

very unusual in the interactions between Jews and Samaritans; he strikes up a conversation with a Samaritan, and to violate another taboo, he speaks with a Samaritan **woman** who has come to draw water for herself. Why she would arrive at noon seems odd, too, but whatever.

Naturally, the woman is surprised at being addressed by this Jew, and says so to Jesus. This gives Jesus an opening to say, *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**.*

Now she's getting really confused; you can almost hear her mental gears grinding. Remember Nicodemus last week and how he struggled (and failed) to understand what being born again referred to. The Samaritan woman's thoughts are something like, 'You just asked *me* for water, but now you're saying that *you* have special "living" water. What's up with you, buddy?' She fires right back at him, *Mister, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that "living" water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well?*

You heard it: she threw down a challenge – *Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?* His well and his water have been giving life for every generation since Jacob watered his flocks. Have you got *that* kind of "living" water, Mister?

Jesus is ready and tells her that his "living" water means never thirsting again and it brings eternal life. She understands the first part about never thirsting and says to give her some of that so she doesn't have to tire herself trekking to the well all the time.

Jesus knows she missed the second part, a bit like Nicodemus. But Jesus wants to spring a trap on her. Feigning to bring this important conversation back to a proper footing, he tells her to get her husband. She says she has no husband. Yes, affirms Jesus. In fact, you've had five husbands and the man living with you is not your husband.

Social law for both Jews and Samaritans allowed only three marriages, and anything beyond was immoral. But there is more hidden in the language, something we expect from John's gospel. The Hebrew word for husband is *ba'al*, just like the name of the pagan god. It's possible that John was poking at Samaritans who don't worship Yahweh of the Hebrews, but worship multiple *ba'al* gods, too. There are more fun possibilities, but let's move on. Just remember, it's quite possible that this woman was a worshiper at one point in her life. If her marital record included five husbands, her religious tradition may have dumped her, not the other way around. It's very possible that she longs to be connected once again to the community of faith and to be in the favor of her God.

At Jesus' correctly identifying her life's course and current status, she knows that this fellow is exceptional, whoever he is. She calls him a prophet. As a Samaritan, she seeks to confirm the primary difference between Jews and Samaritans. A Samaritan may worship *ba'al* – the Lord – on the mountain, but Jews insist that God – the Lord, *ba'al* – must be worshiped in Jerusalem.

Jesus affirms the difference as she detailed it, and then adds the key to the whole story when he says: *But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.* Did you catch that? The time is now upon us when the true worshipers of God will be defined not by **where** they worship, but by worshiping in spirit and in truth. Indeed, such worshipers will be sought in the coming time.

On cue, the woman states her awareness of the promise of the coming time: *I know that Messiah is coming.* Jesus replies, “Yeah, I’m him.

The point that almost slips by our notice is that line about true worship being “in spirit and truth.” Jesus declares that in the coming age, being advanced in his ministry, that all of the distinctions that have separated the people of God – all of those differences, divisions, and boundaries – will be taken away. All will come before God together in the Kingdom and be welcome by God.

In terms of providence, Jesus uses this encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well to show how God has not left her. Indeed, God wants her to be part of the family of God, no matter what society says she is, no matter how society has defined her and how her society has defined itself, no matter who or what she worshiped in the past, no matter at all. Even though she may have been separated from worshiping God, God has not been separated from her. God has provided for her, opening the way through Jesus, through his Son, to bring her back into the fold of believers.

Here is the thirst which sits at the heart of her concerns. She herself didn’t realize it plagued her until she heard Jesus talk about “living water.” Being connected to the covenant promise of her God had been missing in her life, and now she realized that she wanted that back.

In both accounts, we find that the real thirst is to know God, to be connected with God and God’s purposes. The water becomes the object of discussion and concern, but the subject that truly matters is God and being among God’s people. Participating in the covenant of new life, we understand that God’s promise includes us. In this covenant, we can take to heart that God has taken care of what’s ahead for us. We enjoy the living water that satisfies the thirst for meaning, for belonging, and for new life.

May our faith empower our service in witness to our Lord Jesus as we share the living water, knowing that God is with us and for us in all things.