

Thirst for New Life

Exodus 17: 1-7 John 4: 5-26

It seems strange that people can get dehydrated, doesn't it? Yet it happens all the time. People may be sick, not realizing that their body is aggressively using up fluids to deal with an infection or other issue. But in other times, people simply neglect drinking enough water, and there comes a cumulative effect that leads to all kinds of ill effects.

Surprisingly small decreases in body water can result in dehydration. One reference said: "Most people can tolerate a three to four percent decrease in total body water without difficulty or adverse health effects. A five to eight percent decrease can cause fatigue and dizziness. Loss of over ten percent of total body water can cause physical and mental deterioration, accompanied by severe thirst. Death occurs at a loss of between fifteen and twenty-five percent of the body water."

Thirst would seem to be the body's mechanism for alerting the conscious that there is a deficiency between output and intake that needs to be addressed.

Weakness, headaches, dizziness, fainting, heart palpitations, and confusion can be indicators of dehydration. Any of these would seem to be alarming enough, but we can have an amazing sense of resiliency that enables us to push aside such issues and continue as if it was a minor or temporary annoyance that will alleviate itself if given a bit more time. When we actually drop like a ton of bricks, we may come to the stunning conclusion that, yes indeed, here is a problem really must be addressed.

Like I said, we do have any amazing capacity to push aside any symptoms of problems and forge ahead with life and its activities without further concern. There comes that point in time, however, when the thirst can no longer be ignored.

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.

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.

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 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 quite distant 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. Her 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 brings eternal life. She understands the first part about never thirsting and says to give 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, but he 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. This lady gets around.

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. 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* 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. *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, initiated in his present messianic age, that all of the distinctions that have separated the people of God, the body of believers who seek and believe in one God of all, all of those differences, distinctions, and separations will be taken away. All will come before God 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 come home and be part of the family of God, no matter what society says she is, no matter who or what she worshiped in the past, no matter at all. Even though she has likely been separated from worshipping God, God has not been separated from her. God has provided for her, opening the way through Jesus the Christ, 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 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.