

FRESH VISION AND A NEW SPIRIT¹

Exodus 17: 1-7; John 4: 7-15

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One line from President Bush's speech to the nation last Wednesday is a perfect description of the text from Exodus we just read. He told an American public anxious about the economy that there has been a widespread loss of confidence.

I

In the Exodus story, the same people who had observed the plagues fall on their oppressors—the same people who had been liberated from slavery—the same people who had witnessed the miracle of the parting of the sea—the same people who had been grateful for manna to eat—these are the people who now experience a widespread loss of confidence! It was hot; they were thirsty; the cattle were dying; the children were crying; tempers were flaring.

Are we there yet? How much farther do we have to go? My feet hurt. I think I'm going to throw up! I'm tired; I'm bored; I'm sick of manna; I'm frustrated; I need a break. Why can't we rest? Do we have to wait in line

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for the manna? Aren't we there yet? Where is God? Where is this Yahwey?+

The scene is at Rephidim in the wilderness. No one knows exactly where that was. We just know that it was a place they didn't want to be. It was a place where they were thirsty and afraid. It was hot, and they had no water. Heat and thirst have a way of cutting through the red tape of politeness. There is no substitute for water, the basic element of life that would sustain them. So the deepest question of faith (Where is God?) is tied to the deepest material reality of life (Where is water?).

That is to say, the water question is turned into the God question! As a result, they dare to ask the question, Is God with us or not? In their quarrelsome, testy relationship with Moses, they asked a variation of the question articulated in a song of Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*: "Don't talk of love, show me!+ Don't talk of water, show me!+ Don't give me pious platitudes, show me! You brought us out here, now show us the water!"²

We are all sympathetic with Moses in this story. After all, it wasn't his fault that they were thirsty; he was just as thirsty as they were! He was only following what he believed to be the leadership of God. He didn't want

² See Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 137-38.

the job in the first place, and now they were giving him grief after all he had done for them!

I doubt that Moses was thinking, *How so thirsty I could strike a rock with my staff!*+ I expect that never crossed his mind! Yet that is precisely what God tells Moses to do. *Strike the rock*, says the Almighty. *Strike it! Strike it hard! Just do it! And water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.* Like blood from a turnip; like a purse from the ear of a sow; like food from hunger; like joy from sorrow; like hope from despair; like life from death; like Easter out of Good Friday! We can't explain it; we just know it happens; and this story about water gushing from a rock in the desert is our story, our experience, our faith; our hope.

It prompts us to ask the contemporary questions: is there cool water rushing from the rock of nations exhausted from constant conflict? Is there life-giving water for the person wandering in the wilderness of addiction? Is there refreshing water for the person facing the heat of cancer radiation, the fear of illness, the agony of post-traumatic stress disorder? Is there relief for those who feel dried up inside, thinking they are worthless, living a personal hell, and wondering whether they will ever be good enough?

III

Jesus met just such a person. She is nameless in our gospel reading for today. We know her as the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus begins by asking her for a drink of water, but then quickly reverses the conversation by saying, I have asked you for water, but you should really be asking me for water, for I have the water of life. And this woman, dried up, parched, and brittle, says, *Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty....*

This exchange is a dramatic way to make the claim that in this story, Jesus is doing what only God can do: give water in a barren life, turn an inner wilderness into a productive life, and give hope where there is no hope. To some, she was just another nobody, relegated to second or third class status, ignored by others, despised because of her race, ostracized because of her life-style, avoided because of her gender, feared because of her ethnicity; shunned as unorthodox because of her religion, nothing but a dog, as most of the Jews called the Samaritans.

It is hot; she is thirsty; she takes her bucket to the only source of water she knows, trudging under the heat of the noonday sun, and she encounters this stranger sitting on the side of the well. She tucks her head and ignores him. Of course she does! It is social convention. It is an

unspoken rule. They would act as if neither of them were present. She draws her waterō , and *he* breaks the silence!

And when he does, he crosses that most formidable barrier in human history, that barrier that separates people from one another by prejudice, by social convention, by hatred, by fear. He breaks that barrier, cutting through all the pretensions and the red tape, crossing over the social expectations and cultural norms built up over centuries. He speaks to her!

And in doing so he becomes the Jewish man speaking kindly to a Palestinian woman, the Sunni man speaking with a Shiite woman, the Christian fundamentalist speaking with a trans-gendered woman; the Republican speaking kindly to a Democrat; the Barry Goldwater Republican speaking civilly to a Teddy Roosevelt Republican; the farmer making peace with the urban sophisticate; the majority speaking kindly to the minority. Doesn't Jesus have any respect for our long-established boundaries?! Doesn't Jesus know about our culture wars?!

When the disciples returned from an errand, the text says that they *were astonished that he was speaking with a woman.*³ Of course they were! They were still caught up in the old right and wrong, them and us, good and evil dichotomies. They had been taught about the %evil empire,+

³ John 4: 27.

and as far as they were concerned, Samaria was the capital of the evil empire.

But have you noticed? Jesus' discussion with this dried up, thirsty, hopeless Samaritan woman is longer than any conversation with Jesus recorded in the gospels! He looks right into her eyes and gives her the respect that no one had given her for no telling how long. He doesn't care about social taboos. He doesn't care about what people thought. All he cares about is giving living water to a thus far barren life.

This is extraordinary good news! Into the desert of a failed, defeated, dejected, defamed, defaulted, defenseless, demoralized, depreciated, depressed, derided, despaired, despised, despondent, deplorable, desperate life, comes the cool, clear, life-giving, thirst-quenching, hope-instilling water of life! From the hard rock of a failed, floundering, faltering, forsaken, fallen life comes the pure, cool water that quenches the deepest need of life! This is good news for any culture living in fear, anxious over the future, and thirsting for God.

IV

Are you thirsty on your journey? Are you prone to complain? Are you tired? Are you fatigued from trying to create your own personal water supply by pursuing larger portfolios or the latest fashions or longer

vacations or loftier titles? Have you noticed that such attempts can leave us still thirsty? Have you noticed that a \$2,000 Christian Dior handbag doesn't hold much water of life? Have you noticed that the accumulation of things can leave us full of trinkets but empty of meaning? These scripture stories today invite us to ponder these questions.

They also invite us to stand back while God breaks all the taboos of history and social custom and even logic to supply us with a deluge of refreshment. Stand back and stand by, for we are thirsty people! The staff is raised over the rock; Jesus is waiting for us by the well; and God is longing for us to say, *Give me this water, that I may never thirst again!*