

Sunday, October 6, 2013
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Our New Testament reading today comes from the gospel of John.

It is relatively early in Jesus' ministry and he is starting to gain notoriety for healings and miracles.

In today's passage Jesus is alone and encounters a Samaritan woman in an area close to the land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

This story is found only in John's gospel. While John tells the story as a narrative, his focus is always theological, rather than historical.

John's emphasis is most often on the divinity of Jesus Christ.

The reading is from John's gospel 4:1-26.

Sermon - Living Waters

Hagar stood in the desert with her son Ishmael in her arms, the dust of the dry landscape swirling about her.

With no protection from the elements, Hagar walked in the hot sun until she and her child had consumed all of the water; they were parched, without a drop left.

Finally, Hagar cannot bear to see his parched lips any longer, cannot stand that her words and desperate caresses no longer comfort him.

So she places her son under a bush to die.

As she walks away helplessly, trying to escape her child's cries, Hagar calls out to God, begging God to prevent her from seeing the death of her son.

At that moment of heart-wrenching distress, Hagar somehow begins to believe that there is a future for her.

She looks up and sees a well in the distance.

I wonder what stirred within Hagar that allowed her to imagine a future after having just relinquished her son?

What caused her to look up from that barren ground and see living waters on the horizon?

How often do we become so immersed in our own problems that we fail to notice possibilities or opportunities within our grasp?

Earlier this week, Joe and I took a walk just about at sunset.

We usually walk in the morning, so this particular evening the light was completely different than we are accustomed to.

As we walked by a small pond the setting sun illuminated the water providing an amazingly clear reflection of the autumn hillside.

It was a moment of grace – a transcendent moment when the beauty of the earth simply takes your breath away.

The beauty of that water caused us to pause, to notice something that we have walked by countless times-literally to see it in a new light.

I believe that this what the well in the distance looked like for Hagar.

The familiar landscape changed and in a moment of grace she felt hope.

For the Samaritan woman, however, it was different.

She came to the well, like Hagar, cast aside from her community.

She, too, came bearing secrets and sadness.

What she encountered was kindness and truth, a gift of sorts.

She encountered God incarnate – God as man-pure grace.

Jesus' willingness to speak to a Samaritan woman, to offer her an opportunity to serve him a cup of water is acknowledgement of her presence.

He acknowledges that he knows her sins, her secrets, and yet he offers her water that will quench all thirst.

He entrusts her with the information that he is indeed the messiah.

Jesus notices this marginalized woman in a most profound way.

One commentator reflected on this passage and the secrets that we try to keep from Jesus, others and ourselves.

Perhaps this Samaritan woman is not the only secret keeper approaching Jesus.

Most of us have something we would rather others not know, even those closest to us.

We are secret keepers.

But Jesus knows our secrets.

Jesus knows what is in our hearts.

He exposes the Samaritan woman's secrets but then he offers her forgiveness and redemption.

He offers her an opportunity to redeem herself in her community by bringing the good news of the visiting messiah.

We don't hear how the townspeople responded when she summoned them – but I'm certain there was some skepticism.

They, too, knew her secrets.

Perhaps they judged her, based on her lifestyle or personal history, a human trait that transcends time and place.

In 2004 a man named Frank Warren, embarked on a community art project where he asked people to mail in a postcard with a secret written on it.

He started a blog, PostSecret.com, to display the cards he received.

The rules were that the secret needed to be anonymous, and something that had never been shared with anyone else.

PostSecret has generated thousands of postcards, many of them decorated by their senders.

Warren reads them all and picks ten to twenty to post on his blog every week.

He has published several books that are compilations of postcards.

He speaks to college audiences about harboring secrets and the pain that it can cause.

He has raised money and awareness about suicide.

Reading through the secrets that people send is heartbreaking: “Momma, I wish you would have run;” “I wish she wouldn't drink so much;” “I'm better than high school-I just hope I realize it before it kills me.”

Jesus offers the Samaritan woman, and us, an opportunity to disclose our secrets, to lay our burdens down, to cleanse ourselves from our negative feelings, to transform our lives with his living water.

There are countless stories in our Scriptures of characters, like Hagar, who became leaders of nations, saviors of people, and initiators of movements because they were somehow able to envision that life-saving water as they stood in their particular desert.

Even though every breath they took made their mouths as dry as dust, God gave them the imagination to hope.

Jesus draws water in today's story from Jacob's ancient well.

Two thousand years later Jesus is offering us that same water.

When I say the word water, I wonder what you envision.

For some it might be the ocean, for others a particular stream or river that holds a place in your heart.

But this water that Jesus talks about – this living water that gushes up to eternal life – this is a gift of enormous proportion.

It is not a still pond. It is more like Niagra Falls, or white water rapids or the Bellagio Fountains!

Do you know those?

They are a tourist attraction in Las Vegas that kept coming into my mind this week as I reflected on this scripture.

The Bellagio Fountains are a spectacle of plumbing water designed to mesmerize watchers.

The fountains start as still water and then fountains emerge with water cascading in all different directions.

It is choreographed to give the image of dancing.

There are lights and music.

This image of the water rising up in majestic towers perfectly suits our scripture passage this morning.

This water that Jesus is promising has the power to wash away every sin, every flaw, every inadequacy that you might feel.

It washes away all that is old and replaces it with new life.

New energy.

This new energy – renewable energy – brings me back to last week's conversation about Reverend Kirk Jones' three point strategy to a life of grace.

Last week we talked about being still and noticing.

Jesus certainly evidenced both of those in this morning's reading.

This week I want to finish sharing the final piece of Jones' strategy: Playfulness and Rest.

Playfulness he says is doing something for delight's sake.

You might wonder what this has to do with today's passage.

Jones would argue, and I agree, that if you do not care for yourself, you will not have the ability to see or help another person.

Hagar could not have seen the well in the distance if she had not laid her burden – her beloved son – down and turned to God.

The Samaritan woman needed to accept herself as lovable, before she could reenter her community and spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

Many of us have difficulty taking time to play, pause, or rest because we have been socialized to see it as being selfish.

Whenever we take a break, we are haunted by feelings of guilt and the need to return to action as soon as possible.

If you share this predicament, I want you to carefully consider a major shift in perception introduced by Rev. Jones:

Not taking time to rest is selfish because lack of rest insures that the world rarely sees you at your best.

A non-stop lifestyle does not serve your interests and the interests of others as well as you may think.

Living on limited rest gives the world a limited version of who you are.

Jones argues that “Being in the world constantly fatigued and chronically stressed offers the illusion of your actual presence, at best. Just because you are in attendance, it doesn’t mean that you are present.”

A real danger is that we can get so used to living tired, we never get a sense of who we are at our freshest and fullest.

Some of us are so used to living on an "empty tank," it’s hard to even imagine what living on a "full tank" feels like.

Yet, living full, flourishing, is our natural calling as energized and empowered spiritual beings.

Our challenge is to reject fatigue and embrace vitality as our living norm.

We must allow ourselves to be refreshed by the living water offered by our savior.

Let that transformative water wash through you – gush through you for eternity.

Living rested and well is precisely what will insure your best offering to the world no matter what your labor in life may be.

Learn to live full.

Love the world enough to rest.

A rested you means that the world will see you at your finest.

Resting is not a sign of failure, negligence, or weakness; it is an act of unsung benevolence.

So make a commitment today to accept the drink offered by the stranger at the well.

Look up from your problems.

Look ahead, search out the life-giving water on the horizon that you might have missed.

Let the water wash through you – over you.

Go into the week cleansed, fresh and transformed.