

Following Our Thirst

The return of winter, hopefully the last gasp of winter this year, only makes me thirstier for Spring. I find it hard to wait for warmer weather and spring flowers.

But, twenty years ago I had another reason to be thirsty for Spring. Spring was time to take my kayak up the mountain and run down the Red Moshannon Creek. There was a young pastor at the Church of God at Wallaceton who also had a kayak, and for the 3 or 4 years he was pastor there, we had a great time kayaking on the Red Mo.

On the one hand, the Red Moshannon creek basin in the Spring must be one of the most beautiful places on earth. Several miles of the creek runs through the forest with no sign of civilization to spoil the view. There are many ancient boulders along the way, some large and flat enough on top to provide table and sitting space to rest and have lunch. The banks along the creek in Spring are spectacular with Mountain Laurel in full bloom. The water is crystal clear.

On the other hand, there is little or no life in the creek itself. The acid from mine drainage hinders most anything from growing or living in the water. The acidic water also leeches iron from the rocks in the creek, creating the red rust color on the bottom from which the creek gets its name—The Red Moshannon. So, for all its natural beauty, the Red Moshannon was and probably still is a dead creek, unable to support an abundance of life.

A question I would like us to think about this morning is this: Are we regularly drinking from and traveling on a stream that gives us life or are we drinking from and traveling on a stream that, while it looks good, lacks the ability to satisfy our deepest thirst or to take us where our deepest longings can be met?

This question and theme is often visited in the Bible. In Isaiah 55:1-2, the Lord challenges His people with these words: *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.”* In Psalm 42:1 the Psalmist prays, *“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you,*

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O God.” In Revelation 21:6, the One seated on heaven’s throne says, *“To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.”*

In our Scripture passage from Exodus this morning, Exodus 17:1 & 2 say: *The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses replied, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?’”*

Moses’ question: *“Why do you put the Lord to the test?”* reveals the spiritual issue being addressed here. The Lord had already demonstrated His ability and willingness to supply the people’s needs. He had given them a dry path through the Red Sea, delivering them from the Egyptian army that was pursuing them. The Lord purified the waters Marah, making it safe to drink. Then the Lord brought them to the Oasis of Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees. Exodus 15: 27b says *“and they camped there near the water.”* After that, the Lord answered their request for food by supplying them Manna for bread and quail for meat. Time and again, the Lord demonstrated His care for His people. They should have known that He would never let them die from thirst.

But when the Lord led the people to camp at Rephidim, the people could see no source of water. And, despite all that God had done for them in the past, they panicked. Their panic quickly led to anger and doubt; anger against Moses and doubt against God. They were afraid when they had no reason to fear. Nevertheless, Exodus 17:3 says: *“But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?’”*

In other words, they were questioning the whole saving enterprise that God had put into motion on their behalf. Freedom was more difficult than they imagined it should be. For an easy cup of water, they were ready to turn back to slavery. They were questioning God’s integrity and certainly testing His patience. As we read further into this passage we see that Moses, too, was exasperated: Verse 4 says, *“Then Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.’”*

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Verses 5-7 are deep and powerful: *“The Lord answered Moses, ‘Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.’ So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (rebellion) because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”*

What we discover here is that there was a good reason God led the Israelites to Rephidim. Rephidim was at the base of Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, also known as “the Mountain of God.” This is where Moses met God in the burning bush, and where he would soon receive the Ten Commandments. This is where Moses received his marching orders to be God’s agent in delivering the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. Moses’ return here was the sign that God had been true to His promise that He would give Moses success.

So the elders of Israel are led to God’s mountain to see what God will do about their thirst. The Bible also bothers to tell us that Moses is to make sure to take the staff with which he struck the Nile. There was a significant rock to be seen at the foot of Horeb. Moses was instructed to strike that rock with his staff. This resulted in water gushing forth for the people to drink.

I am intrigued by the description of Moses’ staff as the one *“with which he struck the Nile.”* Why does God remind Moses of the Nile rather than the Red Sea? I think it goes something like this: When Moses struck the Nile, its waters were turned to blood so that everything it touched died. But, now, that same staff is used to produce life-giving water. This is surely telling us something about faith. Pharaoh doubted God and rebelled against Him, and his source of life-giving water was contaminated. Moses believed God and obeyed Him, and living water was given him from a rock. Same staff.

What this tells me is that faith cuts both ways. A lack of faith or faith placed in the wrong place brings condemnation, misery and death. Faith in the true God brings forgiveness and abundance of life. Likewise, the plague of blood upon the Nile was a sign of condemnation for Pharaoh, but it was a part of Israel’s deliverance. It’s just like the blood of Christ in the sense that that blood brings judgment

on those who reject Him but forgiveness and everlasting life to those who believe in Him.

Now an objection someone might make here is that I am being a bit too creative in my interpretation of Scripture. Does any of this really have anything to do with Christ or am I just reading into it something that is not there? Well, if I am, I'm in good company. Hear the words of Paul in I Corinthians 10:3-4 as he speaks of the Israelites in the wilderness: *"They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."*

One of the marvelous things about the Bible is that although it was written over many years and by many different authors, it tells a single message and all the parts fit together into a perfect whole. Thus, everything we have seen in our Scripture texts so far, leads up to our Gospel reading in John 4.

The setting in John 4 is this: Jesus is sitting by Jacob's well. And, if you know your Bible, you know that Jacob's name was changed from Jacob to Israel. Symbolically, Jesus is sitting on the top rim of God's plan for His chosen people. Jesus fulfills all the promises of God leading up to this moment. A Samaritan woman shows up then and the conversation goes like this: Jesus gets the woman's attention by asking her for a drink from the well. The woman is stunned because Jewish men do not normally acknowledge or speak with any Samaritans, let alone a Samaritan woman. The woman asks Jesus why he is breaking protocol. Jesus answer doesn't seem to fit the question: In John 4:10 Jesus says, *"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."* The woman tells Jesus that the well is deep and since He doesn't have a bucket or rope to draw up water, she wants to know where He's going to get this "Living water?" She challenges Jesus further by essentially asking Him who He thinks He is: She asks, *"Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it?"*

Then Jesus gets really mysterious: He says (vs. 13-14): *"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."* The woman jumps to

the bait: *"Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."*

With the woman fully engaged in the conversation, Jesus goes to the heart of her need. She may be thirsty for water but Jesus knows that what she is really thirsty for is authentic love and cleansing and forgiveness for her sinful choices, past and present. So, Jesus tells her to go fetch her husband, to which she confesses that she has no husband. Jesus agrees with her, telling her that she is living with a man who is not her husband and that she has had five other husbands in the past. At this, the woman tries to change the subject by engaging Jesus in a discussion about the proper place for worship. Jesus' answer about worshipping *"in Spirit and in truth,"* raises a question in the woman's mind, while an even greater truth is rising in her heart. She says: *"I know that Messiah" (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."* Then Jesus declared, *"I, the one speaking to you—I am He."*

The Samaritan Woman came seeking to satisfy her physical thirst but she got more than she bargained for. She found the One and only One Who could quench the thirst of her soul. And, it seems to me that we have a pattern here. The bottom line is that we are all thirsty but for what we don't know. And, we try to satisfy our thirst in a thousand different ways. Sometimes, like the ancient Israelites, we even get impatient and cranky because our thirst is going unsatisfied. But what we all need to know and even more than know—experience—is that the rock at the foot of Mt. Horeb and the Man sitting on the edge of Jacob's well are one in the same. And what we also need to know is that if strike that rock with the staff of faith and surrender our lives to that Man, Jesus Christ, we will tap into an ever-flowing stream of living water.

In John 7:37-38 Jesus says *"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."*

Are you thirsty for more than water this morning? Are you thirsty for something that you can't buy in a glass or bottle? Then follow that thirst until you come to the Rock at Horeb and the Man on the rim of Jacob's well. Follow your thirst until Jesus takes it away by filling your heart with the Holy Spirit.

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**Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-15;
I Corinthians 10:1-11**

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