Thirst (Water)

Exodus 19"1-7 and John 4:5-15

March 27, 2011; Pat Cameron

The two texts for this morning's teaching involve water images: 1) God, through Moses, provides water for the thirsty Israelites in the wilderness, and 2) the Samaritan woman offers Jesus water to quench his thirst, and Jesus offers her "living water."

The Bible is filled with references to water. According a Tennessee pastor who has counted these references and posted them on his church's website, water is mentioned in the Bible 722 times. (www.learnthebible.org).

Biblical references to water are primarily associated with four things: birth, fertility, danger, and cleansing. These references all have symbolic meaning. In creation, the first birthing act, God separates the waters from the dry land. After his birth, Moses' mother leaves in the river where he is rescued and raised by Pharaoh's daughter.

God promises fertility to the land by providing ground water and rivers, and offering water in the desert. According to prophets such as Ezekiel, Joel, and Zechariah, a fertilizing river will one day flow from Jerusalem, bringing great prosperity to God's people.

The danger of water is illustrated in such stories as the great flood and the Exodus from Egypt across the Sea of Reads (or the "Red Sea"). Jesus calms the stormy sea. The ultimate cleansing ritual in the Bible that Christians still practice today is the the act of Christian baptism (Oxford Companion to the Bible: 703).

Along with these symbolic references to water in the Bible are the practical dimensions of water quenching literal thirst. Although part of Palestine was fertile, part of it received 10" of rain per year or less. In times of drought, water was an especially precious commodity. Means of collecting and storing rain were devised. From at least the time of Abraham, there are biblical stories about wells, dug to find underground sources of water. According to George Kirkpatrick's Internet article entitled "The Wells of Abraham."

In Abraham's day, wells were dug by hand through solid limestone. Sometimes steps were carved in the limestone and the people went into the well with their containers and carried the water out. Other wells used ropes and buckets, or water skins to draw out the water. Some had water wheels where pitchers were attached to a rope that went down into the water and came up full of water. (www.newfoundationspubl.org)

Wells were built near encampments, in arid wilderness oases, outside of cities, and sometimes in the courts of houses of wealthy people. Wells provided a reliable source of

water for animals as well-- a necessity for maintaining livestock if there was no creek or pond. (www.newfoundationspubl.org)

But wells were also precarious, as they depended upon underground springs or rain to maintain them (www.bible-topics.com). This may have been what happened when Moses led the Israelites to camp at Riphdim. The text says, "There was no water," but it may be that the well had dried up.

It's not hard to imagine that the people were not only thirsty, but dehydrated, having walked for miles and miles without water. If you've ever been around someone who was seriously dehydrated, or if you've been dehydrated yourself, you know that getting fluids into the system is crucial.

In their desperation, the Israelites demand Moses to give them water. Moses' response is anything but sympathetic. First, he denies any responsibility for the dilemma. "Why do you quarrel with me?" Moses seems to imply that it'ss not his fault that he led the Israelites to a place without water. Secondly, Moses accuses the people of testing God ("why do you test the Lord?"). In other words, so what if you're thirsty? You take what God gives you and you don't complain.

The text repeats the plight of the people: they thirst for water. They are parched; painfully thirsty. Angered by Moses' seeming indifference, the Israelites accusatorily reply, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" This is too hard to handle for Moses, so he asks God for some advice about what to do with these people. God instructs Moses to go ahead of the people to the rock at Horeb, taking the elders with him, and to strike the rock with his staff which will bring forth water. so the people can quench their thirst. Moses obeys, and out of the rock flows water.

What is the symbolic meaning of this water story? Is it that the people tested God, and God came thorough? Or is that God tested the people to teach them they should always obey God even when times are tough? The latter is usually the assumed meaning. There are two other tests that God gives the people preceding this one: the lack of drinkable water in Ch. 15, and the lack of food in Ch, 16. All of these tests are to teach the people to place their trust and faith in God who is leading them through the wilderness through his servant, Moses.

But let us not allow the symbolism of the water reference in this text block the literal meaning. The Israelites were thirsty. God provided them with water to quench their thirst. People are still thirsty today. Who will God use to quench their thirst?

Jesus is thirsty as he enters the Samaritan village of Sychar. There is no evidence that such a village existed in Samaria, so it may have been Shekhem or some other village (http://montreal.anglican.org). In any case, Jesus is taking the shortest route from Judea to his destination, Galilee which takes him through Samaria.

Seeing a woman coming to the well to draw water, Jesus tells her to give him a drink. The woman is shocked that Jesus would ask for a drink from her, a Samaritan woman. The gospel writer inserts an editorial note—"Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans"—in case the reader isn't aware of the animosity between the two.

The Samaritans lived in the territory that used to be that of the northern kingdom of Israel. But when the Assyrians conquered Israel, it took the leaders away and left behind the common people behind. The Assyrians also relocated people from the other nations they had conquered into the same area as these left-behind Jews, now called Samaria. By contrast, years after the Babylonians had conquered the southern kingdom, when the exiles were allowed to return home, the people were, for the most part, pure Jews.. They looked down upon the people of Samaria because they had intermarried and lacked the purity of the Jewish blood lines. Also, the Samaritans had erected a rival temple to the one in Jerusalem, claiming that God preferred to be worshipped at their temple on Mt. Gerizim rather than the Judean temple on Mt. Zion. These and many other reasons are meant by John's simple words, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans."

But John sees no reason to explain to his readers why asking a Jewish woman for water is so surprising. Even if some of his readers were clueless about Samaritans, none of them would have doubted that speaking to a woman in public just wasn't done. Jesus' thirst for water leads him to break two social conventions: speaking to an enemy—a Samaritan—and speaking to a second-class citizen, a woman.

Jesus tells the woman that if she knew God's gift, she would have asked *him* for water, instead of the other way around. He would have given her *living* water. The woman seems to understand that Jesus mean himself when he refers to "God's gift," but she doesn't get the symbolism about this "living water." She asks Jesus how he would have drawn this "living water" from such deep well without a bucket. "Living water" was a common reference to moving water, as in a river or spring. Perhaps the well was replenished with spring water, and that's why she thinks Jesus is still talking about the well from which she draws her water.

How is it that Jesus claims he can get this "living water?" The Samaritan woman asks him, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" In his typical fashion, Jesus doesn't answer the question she woman asks, but responds in a way that moves the conversation where he wants to take it. "Everyone who drinks out of this well to quench their thirst will only get thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty. My water is spring water which gushes up to eternal life."

Does the woman get it? Not at this point. "Sir, give me this water," she asks of Jesus, "so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." She hopes she can stop having to walk to the well daily, having to lean over it to dip her bucket, and the back-breaking effort of hauling it up. As the story progresses, beyond the text we read this morning, she acknowledges Jesus as a prophet because he had told her "everything she had

ever done," including having five previous husbands—(well, at least not quite as many husbands as the late Elizabeth Taylor). When Jesus tells her he is the Messiah for whom she's been waiting, she flees, leaving her water jar behind, shouting, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

On the symbolic level, the story reminds us that Jesus offers, through faith in him, a much more nourishing and satisfying life than living just to satisfy one's physical needs. With sustenance from Jesus, we can put down our jars filled with things that don't bring us long-term satisfaction. But we also need to remember that what brought Jesus to his encounter with the Samaritan woman was his thirst, and hers, for water. If they hadn't thirsted for water, Jesus would have never had the occasion to bring the woman at the well to seek the living water he offered. The literal meaning of the text is that people are thirsty—and they are still thirsty today.

The world is facing an acute shortage of drinkable water. According to the World Health Organization, 1.1 billion people lack access to potable water, and 2.6 billion people lack adequate sanitation. The result, WHO states is likely to be an increase in diseases such as typhoid and malaria. Disease, coupled with longer periods of drought in the southern hemisphere, increasing the number of "water-stressed" people—those without a reliable source of drinking water. At the current rate, WHO estimates that 2/3 of the world's population will be living in water stress conditions, with 1 billion, 800 million people facing absolute water scarcity. (www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/wwd7_water_scarcity_final_rev_1.pdf).

When I think of MCC's relief and development work, I usually think about helping people meet their food needs. I was surprised to find that MCC has recognized the urgency of the water crisis, as well. MCC's website states. "Water is life. A person can survive for weeks without food, but will die in a few days without water." Over two thousand years since Jesus asked the Samaritan woman to give him water, the people of Palestine still thirst. In Bethlehem, MCC is building a water-treatment plant. This will prevent the illnesses borne by drinking sewage-contaminated water and give the people of Bethlehem clean water to drink. Through this congregations' support of MCC, we are a part of this mission. For the people of Palestine, drinking clean water is life indeed.

I am all for looking for the deeper meaning behind the stories in the Bible. There is a lot more to the Bible than its literal meaning. But sometimes I think a literal reading is called for. When Jesus commands us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit prisoners, I believe that is, literally, what we are supposed to do.

Jesus knew what it means to be hungry and thirsty. He spent 40 days in the wilderness, where both food and water are scarce. According to John's gospel,, some of his last words just before his death were "I am thirsty."

The living water that Jesus offers should not be separated from meeting people's basic survival needs—and water is one of the most basic. We must offer the world both H20 and living water, so they will never thirst again; for water is life.

According to John's gospel, as Jesus was about to die, he spoke his last words from the cross: "I thirst."

The living water that Jesus brings cannot be separated from meeting people's basic survival needs—and water is one of the most basic. We must offer the world both H20 and living water so they will never thirst again. Water is life.