

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent  
February 24, 2008**

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**Today's gospel is one of the longest we ever proclaim in church liturgy. But you already know that by now. It is also one of the most sacred and solemn narratives in all the Gospel accounts of Jesus' public ministry. It is certainly part of John's peculiar theological and poetic genius on full display.**

**Unfortunately it is easy to miss the real point in telling the story. Too many people read or hear it listening to it as if it were a straight-forward prose account that just gets too long and confused. Bad writing! Needs editing! We need it to be tidier prose so we can try to pull it apart, take out the confusing parts, and understand it. But it is not prose; it is poetry, poetry of the highest spiritual variety. It needs to be hummed—like a song—or skated on—lightly and with delight. It describes the *journey* of faith, the song of a woman gradually drawn into a mystery far larger than she had ever imagined.**

**If all you remember of this story is the old song “Jesus met the woman by the well,” and the conclusion that this Jesus was a prophet who could tell someone anything she'd ever done, you only have one small piece of the real story. This story is one of three that John's gospel relates about how people**

come to faith, to belief in Jesus (the other two we will hear on the next two Sundays: the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus). But this, today, is a story about us, all of us, not just this Samaritan woman.

She demonstrates some very clear obstacles to belief. First, she has a chip on her shoulder about being both a woman and a Samaritan. In both cases, she was looked down upon by most Jews. In her anger and frustration, she tells the stranger she has everything she needs. No thank you! I have Jacobs' water, and you have no bucket anyway. But Jesus is still thirsty, not just for water but for her spirit, for her soul, for her life. He won't let her off the hook that easy.

When she finally says she would love to have this "never-ending" supply of water—only for the convenience implied—Jesus ups the ante. She remains now not so much hurt and overly sensitive to her place as a Samaritan and woman; now she's getting interested. But she still doesn't know exactly why.

Jesus takes the initiative again. "Go get your husband." And you know the rest. Now she is interested. He is a prophet, a seer. So now she talks religion with him. She continues her line of questioning. (Notice how the woman is not afraid to ask questions of Jesus; his own disciples will not ask any questions when they re-appear on the scene.) Let's talk theology, she

**says. You Jews say to worship God on Mount Zion; we Samaritans say to worship on Mount Gerizim. Whose right, Jesus? But Jesus will not be sidetracked. He continues inviting her deeper and deeper into a spiritual awakening and faith she has never known before. The real God, his God, is uninterested in details of liturgical propriety. God will be worshiped only in Spirit and truth; the rest is incidental.**

**This all takes place on the center stage: it is Jesus and the woman. Now on a side stage in this drama, here come Jesus' disciples back. No questions; just statements. "Eat something, rabbi." Jesus continues his culinary discourse: "I have food you know not of." And you, in your blindness, will have to reap what others are sowing. Still dense, they are. But meanwhile, there is yet another side stage on which all the townspeople gather, ripe for the reaping, and proclaim him the "Savior of the world."**

**Think of it as a triptych. Center stage: Jesus and the woman. Stage left: the disciples. Stage right: the whole population of Sychar (or Skechem, the famous Old Testament village). The thirst has been slaked—both for Jesus and for them. And the people are fed with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. All these stories in John's gospel are about Baptism and Eucharist. That's why they appear every Lent as Catechumens and candidates prepare**

**for the great Vigil.**

**Leading people to a deeper and more freeing notion of worship and of God is Jesus' food and drink. And, in turn, sowing the seed of faith brings the waters and bread of life to the whole world—even Samaritans (and those in today's cultures and church who are still outcast and rejected). John says this is what all Christians do. This is our invitation. To be led deeper by our own questions about faith to the point where we, too, *have* to lead others to the waters. It is a challenge and it is an invitation—meant for all of us. It is Lent, after all!**