



## **Refreshing Water**

### **Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; John 4:5-42**

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There's nothing more essential to life on earth than water. Yet, as recent dramatic images from the Colorado River have attested, the situation is critical. In fact, the global water crisis is known from Cape Town to Flint, Michigan, and from rural, sub-Saharan Africa to Asia. People are struggling to access the quantity and quality of water they need for drinking, cooking, bathing, handwashing, and growing their food.

Insufficient or inaccessible drinking water means that families struggle to make a living and are locked in poverty for generations. The United Nations recognizes the importance of raising awareness to the global water crisis each year on World Water Day, March 22.<sup>1</sup>

Today's Scripture passages pick up on the theme of water. We start with the Israelites and Moses in the desert. At first, the people trust God's promise of freedom from slavery and follow Moses into the desert. Whether in Egypt or in the desert, the Israelites face death in the eyes.

In Egypt, after an initial benevolent acceptance and flourishing interaction with the local population, the descendants of Jacob are subsequently treated with suspicion and fear and faced humiliation and forced labor.<sup>2</sup>

After escaping the pursuing Egyptian army and crossing dry-footed the Re(e)d River, the people quickly start complaining: They miss the food the Egyptians let them have, they fear they would die of thirst ... and on and on.

Acting as if God has made no plans and is incapable of providing for them, they grumbled so much that Moses expected a mutiny.<sup>3</sup> In response, and to show how shortsighted they are, the Creator of snow and rain brings forth water from stone, demonstrating that for God, nothing is impossible.<sup>4</sup>

The desert wanderers do have legitimate cause for worry. Who can blame them? They trusted the God of Moses and were excited about their freedom, but now they face the brutality of the desert. Have they trusted in vain? Does God care? Does God even exist? Has their new political leader, Moses, made promises he cannot deliver? Is it foolish of them to keep following him?

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<sup>1</sup> [Global water crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help | World Vision](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Israel in Egypt - Associates for Biblical Research \(biblearchaeology.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> See Numbers 11 where Moses accuses God of being a negligent mother and complains that his task is more than he can handle.

<sup>4</sup> See Job 38.

Like so many people today, they had no idea where their next meal would come from, and clean water had become a luxury they could only remember. When we consider how many traumatized people live in precarious conditions (such as war and civil unrest, forced displacement, ecological disasters, ideological and religious persecution), we are not too much off to think they are anxious and frightened because the situation is entirely out of their control.

Yet, God is merciful and compassionate. God has pity on those who are desperate and feel abandoned even by God. Isn't a life of faith often marked with cries of distress and desperation?<sup>5</sup> But the poor in spirit and those who mourn are blessed in the eyes of the Lord (Matthew 5:1-10).

Israel's thirst sets up John's account of the woman at the well. John reports a story of despair and resignation in need of blessing and healing. Jesus, dispenser of refreshing water, reveals himself vulnerable to make all those who thirst strong. We, who usually turn to God for help, find him hungry, thirsty, and exhausted from a journey, crushed in the hottest time of the day by a well.<sup>6</sup>

The vignette is almost comical. A Jew and a male who normally would not speak to a Samaritan and a woman, now begs for water. This is highly improper. Not the religious or patriotic thing you would expect. Does he have no shame and no pride? John makes it clear that this is an extreme relational taboo with a very strong parenthetical explanation: "Jews in those days wouldn't be caught dead talking to Samaritans."<sup>7</sup>

"Jesus, the one John describes as the Logos, has a vulnerable moment, and admits that he is parched. He is very direct and knows what will ease his thirst: 'Give me a drink,' he says to the Samaritan woman. This is one of the few times we hear Jesus request something from another person. He needs something that she can provide.

At that moment it doesn't matter that he is the Son of God, the world's Savior, a man in a male-oriented society or a Jew encountering someone from the ethnically disparaged Samaritans. All the barriers and differences – like gender and nationality – that might divide them fall away. Jesus is simply a person with a basic human need, and this woman can help him. She can give him water."<sup>8</sup>

John doesn't tell us that Jesus is puzzled that someone is out doing chores in the hottest hour of the day. In fact, who would be in their right mind? In this time of need, I think he is rather relieved and absolutely not ashamed of crossing boundaries and risking rejection.

How about you? Is it hard to admit to your vulnerability and ask for help from your neighbor? And what if your neighbor is your sworn enemy, someone you really can't stand, and with whom you have a long standing feud? What will you do with that heavy chip on your shoulder? Will you reveal your need? Will that mean your defeat?

"Give me a drink," sounds like a pickup line. How can he be serious?

This comes across quite shocking to the Samaritan woman. And even uncomfortable as she is supposed to show hospitality to a stranger in need of water in the desert. Isn't that a staple of her ancestral faith or has she, just as her people, abandoned all basic principles of Father Abraham's

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<sup>5</sup> Ps 9:9; 10:1; 27:13-14; 43:5; 118:5; 120:1; 2 Sam 22:7; Is 61:3; Rom 8:35; 12:12.

<sup>6</sup> Or on the cross, requesting our assistance and soliciting compassion: see John 19:28

<sup>7</sup> This Bible translation is from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, John 4:9.

<sup>8</sup> William Flippin Jr., *Take A Sip*, Living Lutheran, March/April 2023

religion confirming the Jews' accusation? She ducks the challenge now and will return the favor to him later with a religious challenge of her own (v. 20).

When she quips back that he is rather daring (out of his mind?<sup>9</sup>), Jesus exposes her ignorance of whom she is talking to (v. 10). If she only knew, she would be the one humble enough to admit being in a place of need and to risk vulnerability. If she only knew, she would be the one daring to cross boundaries, and to ask for a drink. Jesus reveals to her that he could relieve a thirst she is not aware of or is too proud and hurt to admit. By opening up to God, she would experience living waters springing up in her. (vv. 10.13-14)

Is the Samaritan woman that different from us? Do we not ignore our needs before God and others afraid to ask, resolving to deal with our pain by suppressing it, afraid of being unheard, misunderstood, made light of, or worse yet, rejected? Would God hear us? Would people care?

Or are we too uncomfortable to sit with our wounds, not wanting to hurt all over again or to get stuck in our struggle to make sense of it all? Are we consumed by our anger? Is our past too traumatic to handle? Are we willing to reach out for help?

Jesus opens a door for the Samaritan woman to step into a more intimate place, a secret place (isn't it where we are asked to offer our prayers to the Father?<sup>10</sup>) and reveal more of herself in all honesty: "Go and call your husband." (v. 16) She admits she has none. In fact, Jesus points out, she has had five.

Is that it? Is insufficient love, missed love, aborted love, misunderstood, or mishandled love the reason for her avoidance of crowds? Is this why she comes to the well at a time when she is confident she wouldn't run into people? Is she trying to avoid having to explain herself again and again, having to remind herself of her past hurt, wanting to avoid shaming looks or unwelcome comments?

It is possible that her five husbands came and went due to factors outside of her control. Perhaps she was a widow, or maybe her husbands divorced her for being infertile. It is even possible that her husbands divorced her to marry someone else. Maybe her many marriages were the result of a combination of these possibilities. We aren't given an explanation for why she was married so many times. She likely was a victim more than a harlot as the usual commentary goes.

Jesus recognizes her need for living water: this would bring her healing and peace. Isn't that what we all need, healing and peace?

Her availability to having her secret known with no judgment, blame, or shame, opens her to question her own (and her people's) prejudices, suspicion, and competition with their Jewish neighbors. Could this Jewish stranger be a prophet? Maybe Messiah himself?

Jesus' revelation invites her into a renewed relationship with God and with people. It moves her to leave her water jar on the ground<sup>11</sup> and share her newly found joy with the rest of the villagers.

Salvation springs from reconciliation with God and one another. It happens when we attend to God's thirst (in ourselves and others) and respond with personal openness, hospitality, and

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 3:20-21

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 6:6

<sup>11</sup> Attunement with God sets priorities straight. See Matthew 4:1-11; John 4:34; 6:53-58.

vulnerability. It becomes evident in our zest for life and our renewed relationship with God's world.

May we drink from God's living waters. May we experience ourselves renewed in the Spirit of God and fed with joy. May we entrust confidently our life secrets and our hurts to God and may healing flow freely into all our relationships. Amen.