

Lent 3A (3/19/17)

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

**John 4:5-42**

*We are relatively isolated in our little lives. Either out of anxiety or complacency, we rarely emerge from the safe confines of our particular contexts. But there's no substitute for a holy encounter with an unknown "other," someone whose experience and perspective might expand what we know. Mutual attentiveness and vulnerability have the power to transform, leading us to living water that quenches our deepest thirst.*

In 2006, New Jersey made a valiant effort to adopt a new state slogan. After paying an advertising agency a quarter million dollars for mediocre results, Governor Richard Codey solicited suggestions from the public. He received over 8,000. As you might imagine, some of the proposed slogans were sarcastic – for instance: “New Jersey: Most of Our Elected Officials Have Not Been Indicted.” In the end, residents decided between five finalists, and the winning catchphrase? “New Jersey: Come See for Yourself.” Governor Codey was pleased: “I think [it] embodies the pride that we have in our state. We know it's a great state. We're more than just the Turnpike, that's for sure. There's a lot of beauty out there.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the new slogan subtly alluded to common preconceptions about New Jersey, prejudices that might keep visitors away. But, just as the governor insisted, prejudices are barriers to the truth. The only way to know the real New Jersey is to “Come See for Yourself.”

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lezin Jones, “New Jersey Picks a Slogan: Come Read It for Yourself,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/13/nyregion/new-jersey-picks-a-slogan-come-read-it-for-yourself.html>.

Unfortunately, as a result of legal challenges, the state was forced to abandon its new slogan later that same year. Still, **“Come See for Yourself” captures a truth that extends well beyond the boundaries of New Jersey.**

We are relatively isolated in our little lives. None of us can experience the world apart from *this* body, *this* history, *this* network of relationships. **Each of us makes meaning according to our own particular social and cultural context – the proverbial water in which we swim – so we rely heavily on our preconceptions in order to understand the world beyond it. As a result, we are generally skeptical of those whose contexts are different, those who swim in different waters. And, either out of anxiety or complacency, we rarely venture too far from our own corner of the pond and too close to theirs.**

But it doesn't have to be that way. “Come and see,” the Samaritan woman runs to tell her people in our Gospel from John today, and they leave the confines of their ethnic and religious context to encounter and receive Jesus. “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe,” they tell the woman, “for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

*Come see for yourself.*

But Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman is extraordinary in the first place for reasons the Gospel writer makes clear. “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans,” John explains, and men don't address women in public. In other words, **ethnicity and gender establish a rigid boundary between Jesus and the Samaritan woman; they swim in different waters.** True to his character, however, Jesus doesn't allow a boundary to prevent him from engaging a stranger.

“Give me a drink,” he asks, less forcefully than the text might suggest. This is no ploy simply to capture the woman’s attention in order to proselytize her. Recall that Jesus, exhausted from his journey, is resting by the well. But he has no jar, so he relies entirely on the woman, the only other soul in sight, to quench his thirst. Jesus’ initial request, in other words, is an act of vulnerability, of acknowledging his need and asking for help.

For her part, the Samaritan woman neither acquiesces to Jesus’ startling request nor flees the situation, but raises the question of the distance between them: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” Her question, however, does not serve to reinforce the conventional boundary, but rather to transcend it, inviting further conversation. And, Jesus is happy to oblige:

*I will give you living water.*

*Where do you get it? Are you greater than Jacob, who gave us this well?*

*The water I give will never run out; it will gush up to eternal life.*

*Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty again.*

*I know your story. I understand.*

*I can see that you are a prophet. But we are so different, you and I.*

*Soon, all the faithful, Jews and Samaritans, will praise God in spirit and truth.*

*I know the Messiah is coming, who will proclaim all things to us.*

*I am the Messiah.*

Notice that **each step in the conversation – a conversation the Samaritan woman never expected to have – leads them closer and closer to mutual understanding.** Each partner addresses the other earnestly and thoughtfully,

affirming the other's dignity in spite of their differences. Each partner is vulnerable, expressing real needs and questions without shame. Each partner is attentive to the other, listening not only to respond, but to comprehend. **It's a holy encounter,<sup>2</sup> by which the two establish an unlikely connection. And together they discover a new well, one that promises to deliver the living water for which we all thirst: holy relationship, upheld not by blood or creed but by common humanity and a God who saves.** "Come and see," the Samaritan woman runs to tell her people. And, no longer a stranger, Jesus joins them and remains with them for two days.

Dear church, we're reluctant to leave the safe confines of "the way things are,"<sup>3</sup> so we come to conclusions about the wider world from a distance. But **there's no substitute for a holy encounter with an unknown "other," someone whose experience and perspective might expand what we know. Mutual attentiveness and vulnerability have the power to transform, leading us to living water that quenches our deepest thirst, the desire for a world no longer hopelessly divided. The call to Christian faith is a summons to *come see for ourselves* – to encounter the crucified and risen Christ in the faces of those we do not know or understand – then to run and testify to what we've experienced, that he has redrawn our boundaries for the sake of love.**

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<sup>2</sup> See Karoline Lewis, "Holy Conversations," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4839>.

<sup>3</sup> See Anna Carter Florence, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, 95.