

WORSHIP WELL

Deny Dry Devotion

Text: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; John 4:5-26; Romans 5:1-11

We Come to the Well

The woman we meet in John chapter 4 had come to that well hundreds of times. Each morning she got up, washed, put on her clothes, and then waited till the moment was right. She'd grab an empty bucket or jar, travel that familiar road, draw what she could, and return home again. Week in and week out, the cycle was repeated -- rise, go, get, return -- till she could almost do it in her sleep. Yet no matter how often she went to the well, she still left wishing that the satisfaction she drew there trickled down deeper. She wished it lasted longer. She wished it somehow quenched the thirst that kept her coming back.

I wonder if this isn't something of the experience some of us have as we come here each weekend. We go through our familiar paces to get here. We arrive, sit, stand, sing, and return home again almost on auto-pilot. Like the woman at the well, we get something from coming here. Yet we often leave wishing that the satisfaction we drew trickled down deeper or lasted longer. We wish it quenched more fully the spiritual thirst that keeps us coming back.

In this story from John's gospel, Jesus suggests that an encounter with Him – with God – ought to be better than this. It ought to be like drinking from the cold, clean, clear streams of **"living water,"** Jesus said – the kind of deep drink that satisfies you to the core and leaves you wiping your mouth with a grateful "ahhh" (John 4:14). But Jesus says that to have that experience requires more than just getting ourselves here or going through the motions. Jesus says that the deep refreshment of God comes to those who truly WORSHIP him.

"A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks." What did Jesus mean by that? What does it mean to really go to the Worship Well or to Worship Well and how can you and I do this more fully? That's what I invite you to think about with me this morning.

We Remember That The Basis of Worship is Wonder

Some of you may know that the Hebrew word for worship is "barak." It comes from a root that means "to bow down or kneel" or, literally "to prostrate" oneself in humility and wonder before someone vastly greater. When I was a teenager, this image of worship seemed revolting to me. All I could picture was

that scene from the Wizard of Oz, where the little wizard is hiding behind a curtain, but booming out through a loudspeaker, demanding that Dorothy and her friends bow before Oz, the great and powerful! So that what the God these Christians follow wants, I thought. He wants us to grovel in front of Him and tell Him how great He was. Most of us have a hard enough time with the people we know who constantly demand that kind of reassurance; why in the world would we want to follow a GOD who was so insecure? Does that every occur to you?

It wasn't until March 21, 1988, that this aspect of Christian practice really and fully made sense to me. I went on a blind date that night and, against all odds and expectations, met and fell in love with the remarkable woman who is now my wife. Suddenly, I found myself wanting to do things that once seemed revolting to me. I wanted to fall on my knees in front of this woman and beg her for permission to spend eternity with her. I wanted to go around doing things that pleased her. I wanted to sing her praises to the world, to humble myself in celebration of the amazing grace that could lead someone as lovely, exciting, and intelligent as she is to love a guy like me. And I've come to see that, on a much higher plane, this is something of what it means to worship God.

In the words of Thomas Carlyle: "The basis of worship is wonder." To worship God is to give practical, personal expression to the wonder that fills us when we see who God is and how he has loved us. When you catch a glimpse of the beauty of His character, you don't have to be forced to sing out in adoration. When you see the contrast between his holiness and your own, you don't have to be forced to confess your sins or seek forgiveness. When you think of all the blessings God has showered upon you, or reflect upon the splendor of His Creation, it no longer feels like a chore to offer God your thanksgiving or steward the treasure he's entrusted to you, but more like a privilege. When you consider the genius of His thoughts, you become eager to hear His Word. When you reflect upon the people and issues for whom God's heart pounds, you want to bring them up in the conversation of prayer, simply because it brings your heart just that much closer to His. Do you know what I mean?

We Seek to Worship in Spirit – Authentically & Intimately

It needs to be said that the kind of intimacy with God that true worship promotes is not immediately appealing to everyone. When Jesus tried to establish this kind of close connection with the woman at the well of Sychar, she wanted none of it at first. When Jesus attempts to call her into conversation by asking for a drink, she immediately pushes him away by quoting the law prohibiting a Jew to share a cup with a Samaritan, and pronouncing it taboo for a rabbi to speak in public to a woman (John 4:9). When Christ goes on to say that if she will only ask Him, He will give to her life-giving water (John 4:10), she ignores his obvious offer of spiritual renewal.

Instead, she asks him to explain to her how he thinks he's greater than Jacob, and how he plans to draw water without a bucket (John 4:11-12).

When Jesus calls her to confess to him her troubled private life, she diverts his inquiry again (John 4:17-18). This time, she praises him as a prophet and raises the ancient debate over whether God preferred to be worshipped on Mount Gerazim (as the Samaritans believed) or in Jerusalem (as maintained by the Jews) (John 4:19-20). Finally, when Jesus still refuses to be diverted from his quest, she piously cites her hope that when the Messiah comes, all these thorny questions will be answered (John 4:25). To which Jesus replies, perhaps in exasperation, and maybe amusement: **"I who speak to you am He"** (John 4:26).

I don't know exactly why the Samaritan woman responded as she did to Jesus. Maybe she was too ashamed of who she was to risk sharing her deepest longings and hurts with him. Or perhaps she was just too tough and proud to yield control of the conversation to this challenging man. What I do know is that some of us run from intimacy with God too. We will mouth the words of the readings and hymns. We will bow our heads as if to pray. We will occasionally tune in when the Scriptures are read or preached. But what we do is not worship, at least not the soul-quenching kind. We come to the well but miss the moment of intimacy we might have had with the Wondrous One who is right here in our midst.

Jesus says that the true worshippers God seeks aren't those who worship Him in word, but **"in Spirit"** (John 4:23). All of Christ's questions to the woman at the well – or to you and me -- are targeted at digging down to this deeper level of life. "The living water I want to give you is my Spirit, which will become in you a spring bubbling up to life eternal. But my Spirit will adhere only to your spirit. Offer me a cup of empty liturgy and it will come back empty. Offer me a cup of prayer or music or even silence in which your spirit -- the intimate longings and leanings of your deep self -- are genuinely present and I will fill your cup to overflowing with Myself."

We Are Called to Worship in Truth – Actively & Everywhere

Jesus says that the real worshippers – the ones to whom God pours out his living water -- will be those who worship him not simply in spirit, but also **"in truth."** (John 4:23). The Greek word for "truth" is "aletheia." It is a contraction of two lesser words which mean, literally, "without a veil." This is the reason that Christians focus so much on Jesus when we worship? It's because we believe that to meet Jesus was to meet God without a concealing veil.

In the great temple of Jerusalem there used to hang a gigantic fabric veil that separated the innermost part of the sanctuary – the holies of holy places where

God was thought to dwell – from the outer place where the regular people of this world dwelled. That temple veil was a symbol of the separation between the sacred and the secular – the holy place and the worldly places. But the Bible teaches that at the precise moment when Jesus' work of redemption upon the cross was completed, a great tear went down the middle of that huge curtain (Mark 15:37-39). At that moment, God declared that worship (the experience of beholding and reflecting his glory) is no longer to be confined to devotional acts in deep recesses of religious buildings. Now, worship is meant to be our way of life wherever we go in the world.

If attending worship on Sunday does not affect the way we live on Monday then, chances are, it wasn't worship in TRUTH. When truly practiced, worship helps remove the veil between the sacred and the secular. When it is truly received, the living water of God overflows our cup, runs out of this room, and waters our weekday lives. If we have genuinely raised our voices in adoration and praise today, we will find it easier to notice his blessings and thank him wherever we are on Tuesday. If we have truly confessed our sins to God in this service, we will be quicker to admit and turn from the selfish act or harsh word that slips out on Wednesday. If we have made the effort to really hear God's Word read and preached this morning, we will find ourselves better attuned to the promptings of His Holy Spirit when an important decision or opportunity comes our way on Thursday. If we have actually prayed for others here today, we will find ourselves more sensitive to the concerns of the people we meet on Friday. And if we have offered ourselves and our gifts with integrity in here, we will not find it so difficult to let our resources be used for God's purposes all the way through Saturday.

Some of you may remember me telling you the story of the unusual fountain that stands in the center of a village in Germany. The front of the fountain is engraved with an invitation to "Come and be refreshed." Upon approaching the fountain, however, many a thirsty traveler has found the bowl strangely empty, and without any obvious mechanism by which to resolve its lack. Many a person walks from that place disappointed. But, now and then, someone is moved by an uncommon impulse. She will kneel down, bowing her head over the fountain basin, as if to drink by faith from the empty air. And it is then, and only then that the shifting of her weight in this way activates a secret switch, sending into the bowl from hidden apertures beneath the basin rim the coldest, cleanest water you've ever tasted.

Beloved, Christ has been waiting for you here at this well. Do yourself a favor: Deny yourself the sort of dry devotion that sometimes masquerades as worship. Instead, receive the invitation Jesus has inscribed for you: "Come to Me and be refreshed." **"Come, let us bow down in worship"** writes the Psalmist. **"Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker"** (Psalm 95:6). For Jesus has promised: **"Whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give you will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal**

life" (John 4:14).

Please pray with me:

Gracious God, we worship You not because your ego demands it, but because it is the only natural response to the wonder of Your glory and the splendor of your love. We worship you in SPIRIT, Lord, humbly offering and receiving the intimate fellowship you intend for us at this well. As we lean into you today with all that we are, fill us up with yourself, Lord, so that our lives beyond this room also become acts of worship in TRUTH. Let everything we do in this week ahead become a sparkling, refreshing evidence that your grace is not locked behind some curtain in the temple, but is now available to thirsty people everywhere. Make our lives ladles of your life-changing love for all we meet. In the powerful name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

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