

Gushing Up to Eternal Life

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Christ and the Woman of Samaria," Elisha Whittelsey, 15th Century

Prayer of Illumination

Living God, through the reading of the Scriptures
and by the power of your Spirit,
may we drink deep of your life-giving waters,
and believe, because of your Word,
that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. Amen.

Introduction

Moving is one of my least favorite things in life to do. My most "eventful" move was right after Sarah and I got married in Tempe back in 1999. We decided to move all of Sarah's things *before our honeymoon*. So we drove the U-Haul and trailer from Tempe to Washington state where I was serving my first call as an associate pastor.

Our move across the desert felt like a forty-year journey. It started out great *until we got outside of Phoenix*—our trailer got a flat tire. *No problem*—we called Triple A and even had a little roadside party. Someone gave us caviar & champagne for a wedding present. We rummaged through our wedding presents in the U-Haul trailer and enjoyed our cultured *hors d'oeuvre* on the shoulder of the highway. We even sang and played guitar while waiting. We were back on the road in no time.

Well, we had another problem in Nevada—this time we *ran out of gas*. I have an important tip to pass on to you if you're ever driving through Nevada: *never* pass a gas station without filling up. After several hours, we were back on track for our destination. Then we had another problem in Idaho—*our second flat tire*. After that fiasco, we *finally* made it home to Washington!!! *Yeah!!!*

And *right* as we pulled up to our new apartment with great relief and excitement—*WAMM!!! Screeeech!* I forgot that we were in our truck and I smashed the carport roof with the top of the truck! *Ah, home sweet home! ...*

There's something good in the midst of the pain when God is moving, *or sometimes dragging*, us to a new place—

- a. It puts us in a *great spot* to be dependent upon God
- b. *because we know on our own we don't have a shot*
- c. and then we can receive God's refreshing grace in our need.

The Old Testament and Gospel readings both have moving and travel in the backdrop of both stories. In Exodus 17, Israel is in the thick of their forty-year wilderness wanderings, journeying by stages. Water was in short supply and so they began doing what we human beings are good at doing—grumbling and complaining.

Moses cried to the Lord with exasperation, "What should I do with these people?!!!" The Lord responded, "Take some of the elders with you, bring the staff with which you struck the Nile River and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it." And there the miracle of water happened.

In our gospel reading, Jesus has been traveling and he has come to a Samaritan village. There will be a miracle here, too—living water gushing up to eternal life from parched souls.

Let's hear now the word of the Lord to us from...

Gospel Reading: John 4:5-15 (NRSVue)

⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)^[a] ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir,^[b] you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, ¹⁶ give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – "Gushing Up to Eternal Life"

We human beings like to gather around water—whether it be wells, watering holes, water coolers, or swimming pools. We all need water no matter our background. Water is essential for life. We're made of water. If you're an adult you're about 60% water. Infants are about 75% water. You can only live on average about 3-5 days without water.

In our passage Jesus is thirsty. There are two passages that talk about Jesus' thirst and they both take place at noon. This passage here and another at the crucifixion where Jesus says, "I thirst." Yes, Jesus was fully divine, but also fully human. Jesus is thirsty because he's been hoofing it from Judea back up to Galilee because of another water issue—baptism. The Pharisees didn't like that Jesus' disciples were baptizing more people than John the Baptist. Rather than getting into a water war, Jesus decided to retreat. Judea was in the extreme south. Galilee was in the extreme north. Samaria was smack dab in the middle of the two.

To get to Galilee from Judea, you could take either the scenic route or the express route. The scenic route was longer, but safer. Plus you avoided going through Samaria. The Jewish people were on bad terms with the Samaritans for nearly half a millennium. Samaritans were considered half-breeds and traitors. Jews didn't talk or eat with Samaritans—they both kept their distance from one another. Jews had their mountain of worship; Samaritans had their own. Jews identified most with Abraham; Samaritans identified most with Jacob. Jacob's Well was a holy place for Samaritans—it was a part of their national and spiritual identity.

Jesus chose the express route to Galilee. John says Jesus "had to go through Samaria." Jesus chose the more treacherous path. The Spirit was leading Jesus to the wrong side of the tracks—to the wrong place at the wrong time. This story is an important reminder to us today: Jesus is a fearless boundary crosser and bridge builder. He didn't let social taboos dictate who he would reach out to and touch with God's love. In fact, Jesus even had some bad habits that might have made his mother cringe—like talking in public with women, like good rabbis were *not* supposed to do. Sharing drinks with the suspect Samaritans—or allowing his disciples to eat Samaritan food.



Jesus didn't play by the rules. Women would draw water from the well together, often early in the morning when temperatures were cooler. But not this woman. It seems she was likely there at noon because her peers didn't want to associate with her because of her reputation.

Or maybe, the Spirit was leading her to talk with Jesus?

Either way, Jesus didn't mind being seen with her. "Excuse me—would you mind giving me a drink of water?" Startled by the stranger, the woman said, "Why would a Jew like you be asking a Samaritan woman like me for a drink in a place like this?"

"Actually, if you knew who I am and what I can give, *you* would be the one asking for a drink and I would give you fresh, running water." A thirsty man offering water? *What's going on here?* But it's *deja vu*. Just like the last chapter in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus is being purposely confusing—troubling the waters. Jesus is creating some divine cognitive dissonance with his new conversational partner.

It's interesting to contrast Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. Nicodemus met Jesus in the night. The Samaritan woman met Jesus at noon. Nicodemus was an Israelite, the woman, church tradition tells us her name is Photina (which means Luminous One), and she's a gentile Samaritan. Nicodemus called Jesus a Teacher, she called Jesus a prophet, Messiah, and Savior of the World. But at first, she's thinking, and who can blame her, of literal earthly H₂O. Naturally, she's thinking of physical thirst. Jesus, however, is speaking in metaphors. Jesus is talking about water and thirst to talk about a very different kind of thirst and a very different kind of water.

"Sir, you don't have a bucket and the well is deep. How are you going to draw out this fresh running water you're talking about?"

She's still misunderstanding, but she's on to something—but not quite grasping it yet—like trying to hold water in your hands.

"Those who drink of the LIFE-GIVING WATER that I will give them will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. This water supply is clean, ever-flowing, and will never run dry."

She's open—but still thinking on a very literal, concrete level. Jesus keeps drawing it out of her. Playing along with Jesus she says, "Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us this well? Please tell me where this magic water supply is—then I won't have to come to this well in the heat of day every day." Even though she was still perplexed, she asked Jesus where these mysterious living waters were. Whatever she thinks Jesus is offering, she's open to receiving it.

Asking God is an important form of faith.

⁹"Ask, and it will be given to you;" says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (Luke 11: 9-10)

He also says, "You have not because you ask not." The people of the town would later ask of Jesus, "stay with us." And Jesus did, for two extra days.

What is something you need to ask of Jesus? Step out in faith and... ask.



Jesus redefines water and thirst—this isn't the fountain of youth or magic drinking water that quenches physical thirst. He offers us a different kind of water that quenches a different kind of thirst.

We all have different thirsts: Thirst for attention. Thirst for knowledge. Thirst for acceptance. Thirst for meaning. Thirst for intimacy. Thirst for happiness. These are all lesser thirsts—that speak of our thirst for God and for relationship. Jesus is telling us this morning that the gift of the Holy Spirit—of life eternal—is the only thing that can really *slake* this deep spiritual thirst we have—the cleansing, abundant, refreshing, continuing, self-replenishing Holy Spirit. Jesus is saying don't rely on yourself to provide this—look to God to satisfy your thirst for relationships and life. This living water theme is found throughout the Scriptures.

The Lord spoke a similar message through the Prophet Jeremiah in the Hebrew Scriptures, "My people have committed two sins: they have rejected me, a source of living water, and they have hewn out for themselves cisterns, cracked cisterns which hold no water."

"To the thirsty," says Jesus, "I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." And in Revelation we hear, "the Lamb will lead them to living waters."

The gift of Eternal Life is God's very life—the divine life—part of God's very being. It's given to us and it never runs dry. We can begin to drink deep of it now—not just in the future. This new life Jesus offers is for anyone: no matter your gender, your age, your past, your nationality, your race, your moral reputation. It's free. Jesus was not only a carpenter—he was a plumber. All you need to do is let the Divine Plumber Jesus clear out the stopped up, stagnant, dank, and dirty sewer water of your life and let him hook you up with his gracious glacial waters. Jesus' words soaked into the woman at the well. She experienced and encountered the Messiah. He saw her and took seriously her longings and regrets. He redeemed and refreshed her story—took away her shame. She didn't care what others thought of her anymore. She was empowered to re-engage with her community. She was a powerful witness—preaching the good news of Christ. One pastor put it this way: *the woman who came for water at a well, went home with a well inside her.*

Like the disciples dropping their nets, she left her water bucket and boldly shared with others what Jesus had done for her. God's love poured into her heart, and it didn't and couldn't stop with her. It flowed over to those around her. God would use her as a spiritual sprinkler system to water and grow the spiritual dryness of her community.

It's the same for us. We can't keep this life-giving water to ourselves. It spills over into our relationships. We share it. The Spirit enables and empowers our worship and mission—it's a miracle!

Don't be dispirited, be inspired because the Spirit is in you. God is seeking you out and desiring to lift you up. We have the same hope of hydration. Let's drink deep of these living waters and offer a cold cup of it to others as well, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*, German, late 15th century. The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1963

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