

## March 19, 2017: Lent 3: Water



Have you ever been thirsty? I don't mean the regular, ordinary thirst that you experience after a hot day. I mean really, really thirsty where your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth and all you can think about is water.

In 1996, a young marine corporal named Joey Mora experienced this extreme thirst. He was standing on a platform of an aircraft carrier patrolling the Iranian Sea when he accidentally fell overboard. His crew members did not realize his absence for 36 hours. A search and rescue mission began, but was given up after another 24 hours. After all, no one could survive in the sea without a lifejacket after 60 hours. His parents were notified that he was "missing and presumed dead."

Amazingly, four Pakistani fishermen found Joey about 72 hours after he had fallen from the aircraft carrier. He was treading water in his sleep, clinging to a makeshift floatation device made from his pants—a survival skill taught in military training. He was delirious when they pulled him into their fishing boat. His tongue was dry and cracked and his throat parched.

About two years later, as he spoke with Stone Philips of NBC Dateline, and he recounted his story of survival and the will to live. He said God kept him struggling to survive and that the most excruciating thing of all was the single thought that took over his body and pounded in his brain: "Water!" [NBC Dateline: Nov. 1998] Have you ever been thirsty?

Scientists tell us that the human body is 65% water. Nutritionists remind us that we should drink at least 8 glasses of water a day. Staying hydrated helps with digestion, weight control, and even the reduction of wrinkles in our faces. Water is critical to our health; without water, we simply cannot survive! And so, we pause today at a well in Samaria with our Lord as we journey through the landscape of Lent to drink in the Living Water of Christ.

Our story today centers on a well... Wells were (and still are) life for people trying to live in the wilderness and desert areas of the Middle East. For the Hebrews as a refugee people living in a dry and dusty land, roaming for 40 years in the wilderness, the promise of a land with water seemed like the promise of paradise. But the places where clean, drinkable water was available, were limited and people depended on wells, many of which had been dug or bought hundreds of years before by some of the great heroes of Israel.

Jesus has been traveling with his disciples, walking from Jerusalem to Galilee through the region of Samaria. Our gospel writer tells us he is tired out by his journey, we can imagine he is HOT, as it is about noon, and so when his disciples go into town to find food, he sits himself down by the well. But just as Joey Mora was surrounded by water he could not drink, Jesus was resting right beside a well full of water he could not get to because he had no bucket. When a Samaritan woman approaches, Jesus asks her to

give him a drink. It seems like such a simple request, doesn't it? How hard is it to share a drink with someone at a well? But this woman is taken back, surprised by the request, for two reasons; first, because she is a Samaritan and he is a Jew—and there were deep social tensions between these two groups—they were enemies who did not have casual conversations, and, second, because he is a Jewish man for whom it is not socially acceptable to be seen in a public place talking with a strange woman.

Jesus steps beyond these social barriers to satisfy his physical thirst, but she is still caught up in the social complications of their meeting and questions his request. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" And this is where Jesus takes the conversation from the literal to spiritual, playing with the meaning of thirst and the type of water that quenches that thirst. "If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water." Thirst is so much more than a physical need for water; it's also a spiritual thirst in our souls longing for something more.

Sometimes we thirst for meaning in our lives, we long to understand the how's and why's of life—what is my purpose in the world? Society teaches us that our lives are meaningful if, and only if, we have power and money and status... but when we try to satisfy our thirst with these worldly things, the thirst returns, and maybe even grows in intensity—power desires more power, wealth longs for more wealth. The thirst for more keeps us coming back, because the thirst for a deeper meaning to life is still unsatisfied.

This soul quenching, life-giving water is what Jesus offers the Samaritan woman at the well. She, still caught up in the literal water, is baffled by his offer. But Jesus insists that "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Thirst is one of the most powerful spiritual symbols in all of scripture. As Joey communicated about his experience in the water, dehydration draws the whole of our physical being to a longing for water, so a spiritual void will draw our spirits into a search for deeper meaning for our lives. The Psalmist expressed it this way, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." [Psalm 42:1-2]

There is a deep thirst inside each one of us that longs for God. It's said that we have a "God-shaped hole" in our heart that only God can fill, and too often we try to fill it with other things. As Jesus continues his conversation with this Samaritan woman, he brings up her relationship struggles, the man in her life who is not her husband. He focuses in on the places of brokenness in her life, where she tries to satisfy this soul-deep thirst in all the wrong places. Knowing all of who she is, he still offers her living water, and she is blown away by this gift.

One of the most powerful parts of our scripture is that once her eyes are opened to what Jesus offers, she can't help but share the gift with others. She leaves the well so excited by the prospect of living water gushing up to eternal life within her [yes, even her!], that she can't wait to share the good news of this gift with others. We are told that many of the Samaritans from that village committed themselves to Jesus because of the

woman's witness. This living water is not something we keep to ourselves, but share so that others may experience this soul quenching water through God's love, grace, and forgiveness.

Have you ever been thirsty? It is my prayer that we all experience the refreshment of Jesus' living water, that we open our hearts to receive the continual stream of mercy that flows into us. And may we, like the Samaritan woman, share our witness, drawing others to experience this transformational living water.