

Hound of Heaven
Third Sunday in Lent
February 24, 2008
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Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:5-29

“Just then his disciples came. They marveled
that he was talking with a woman.”
John 4:27a

The most amazing thing in this amazing story is that Jesus did so much, so amazingly much, by doing so very little – so prosaically little!

It seems that all he did was talk with a woman.

How ordinary, mundane.

But of course it wasn't.

Had it been that commonplace, his disciples would not have “marveled” that he was doing it.

In fact, he did just what might be expected from the earthly representative of the Hound of Heaven. More about that later.

Jesus had to travel a long, long way to talk with this woman.

A distance in more than just miles.

For the woman was a woman, but she was also a Samaritan woman.

Samaritans.

Well, we know that Jesus used a Samaritan for shock value in one of his parables. The “good” Samaritan. Knowing his listeners would never believe any Samaritan could be good. It would be like us saying a “good murderer,” a “good rapist,” a “good terrorist.”

That is the way Jesus' people felt about Samaritans. All Samaritans.

If you read first century writings, Samaritans bore the brunt of most ethnic jokes and racial slurs.

For a Jew to cross over into Samaria in the first century unglued all the social, ethical, ethnic, religions, theological conventions of the time.

But Jesus did more than go to Samaria. He went to a Samaritan woman.

Women in the Middle East wore veils even back then. The purpose of the veil was not to protect the woman. It was to protect men from themselves. To protect men from seeing another man's wife, and have desire for her kindled in him, thereby causing him to violate the tenth commandment – do not covet your neighbor's wife. All the concern was for the man.

A woman could not ask for a divorce – but could be put aside by her husband simply saying three times in public: “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you.”

A man was not even supposed to talk with a woman in public.

But there was Jesus, “Give me a drink.”

With those four words, Jesus did an extraordinary thing. Went where no one expected him to go and did what no one expected him to do. With four little words.

Crossing the border into Samaria, where no religious person would go.

Talking to a Samaritan, which no patriotic person would do.

Speaking with a woman, which no decent man would even think of doing.

Drinking from her cup, which made him impure before God!
Something no believer would ever do.

Let's see, were there any essential social conventions that he did not violate?

Let's see? Sexual mores, religious tradition, political reality, ecclesiastical law – no, I don't think he left anything out! He violated them all!

No wonder his disciples marveled that he was talking with her.

Jesus crossed impenetrable boundaries, traveled an immense distance to talk with this woman.

If he had not been willing to go that distance in pursuit of her (and pursuing her was exactly what he was doing – though it looked like he was just sitting on the edge of a well) – if he had not been willing to go that distance in pursuit of her, nothing could have happened.

There could have been no talk comparing the water the woman had drawn from the well with the “living water” Jesus had for her.

Had Jesus not pursued her across every barrier, geographic, social, ethical, political, religious, the woman would not have spoken the truth about herself

-- she would not have seen her true self reflected in Jesus' face.

-- she would not have received the water of life to slake her enormous thirst.

Had Jesus not pursued her – even though it looked like he was sitting still.

In many a sermon I have talked about our need to find God. Our need to meet Jesus. Our need to seek until we find, to knock until the door is opened, to have faith even like a mustard seed to bring us to God.

How Jesus is what we are looking for to fill the blank, empty spaces in our lives.

But in this story, the woman is not looking for Jesus. She is not looking for anything more than water from the neighborhood well.

She is not looking for living water. She does not even know that such a thing as living water exists.

She does not know until Jesus speaks to her.

Then she is certainly aware that with those four small words Jesus has bridged an enormous gap. She is startled, shocked, that Jesus has broken down every barrier to speak to her.

I find this a most hopeful story.

Because more often than not, I just don't have the strength to do what I know I should do to seek and follow Jesus.

More often than not the deeper meaning I know I should be looking for just eludes me.

And I'm not sure anymore I do know just what I should be looking for!

As I read recently: "Often our needs deceive us, and we are the last person to know what we really need."

But this story gives me hope. Hope that when I am worn out with pursuing God, God never tires of pursuing me.

Truly, our God is the Hound of Heaven.

The Bible has many images for God. Father, Lord, King, Wings like Eagle, Shepherd – but the Bible never describes God as a hound dog who will not up the scent until it finds its quarry. For that image we are indebted to the turn of the century poet Francis Thompson who wrote a poem called the Hound of Heaven.

He wrote of God who never gives up on us.

God who never gives up the pursuit of our souls.

Never gives up, though we flee and turn away, run away from God.

Thompson wrote:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.*

*Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,*

A down Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

Actually, it is not a wonderful poem – but it is a wonderful image of God who never gives up, who never turns aside, is never distracted in pursuit of us.

Who pursues us with living water when we are dying of thirst.

Like this woman was – dying though she did not know it.

This woman who, minding her own business, drawing water in the heat of the day from the neighborhood well, had her life changed by Jesus before she even knew how much she needed to be changed. Who rescued her before she knew she was lost. Who gave her the water of life before she knew she was dying of thirst.

Of course this is a hopeful story!

Because it is not just about Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

It is about God and us.

God who never gives up on us.

The Hound of Heaven who pursues us no matter how hard we run.

God whose desire for us is nothing less than salvation.

Living water for our thirsty souls.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.