

Nick at Night, No-name at Noon

A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Susan Quinn Bryan, Pastor

February 23, 2008 – Third Sunday in Lent

**Scripture Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95;
Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42**

Let's begin with thirst.

We all do, of course.

As infants, we come in to the world thirsty.

We need water to stay alive.

However different and separate we may think we are . . . that is universal for human beings. We are one in this basic need: water. We thirst.

For the Israelites in the wilderness, water was of course, necessary for survival.

God providing that water was another reminder of God's saving grace.

When it's hot, and dry and rocky . . . when we are on our wilderness wanderings, and there seems to be no water in sight, God manages to provide what is needed.

"Is the Holy One among us or not?" – the answer was:

"Yes, yes the Holy One is among us!"

God provides even when it doesn't appear possible. God provides.

God rescues us from our thirst. God provides what is needed.

We all need water. We all get thirsty. We thirst for other things as well. Love. Justice. Acceptance. Affection. Comfort. A sense of belonging.

Without those things, we are out in the desert . . . in wilderness wanderings.

The point is simple in these texts: the saving goodness of God and the need for women and men to accept that goodness in trusting and faithful ways.

No matter how hard and difficult things might seem, no matter how rocky the road, no matter how hot and dry the desert – God will provide what it needed.

In each of this morning's readings is an affirmation of God's benevolent care of those who place their well-being in God's hands, an affirmation of God's unyielding love.

Pity us, then, for times when pride and faithlessness keep us from receiving the gifts of grace offered to us.

Last week in our gospel lesson, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, came to Jesus in the night . . . and while he proclaimed that he knew Jesus had come from God, he seemed unable to grasp what Jesus was trying to teach him.

This week, Jesus, a stranger, has come to a land strange to him, among a people alien to him, and he is thirsty.

Nick at Night, No-name at Noon

There he encounters an unnamed Samaritan woman at a well in the middle of the day, and a simple request for a drink launches a deeply theological discussion. This is the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone, ever.

Last week Jesus spoke of the need to be born from above . . . and this week the water breaks. Something new is born . . .

I know that biblical scholars and preachers have forever treated the Samaritan woman as if she is a sexually immoral woman. Their reasoning comes from Jesus telling her “You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.”

Feminist scholars have pointed out that her multiple husbands and current single status may result from a series of levirate marriages in which the last levir refused to marry her. The point of those marriages was to give the woman a son, who would have the name of his deceased father, and would have inheritance rights . . . so that the woman would be cared for in her old age, and the deceased brother’s name would be carried on and not die out. If you read Deuteronomy 25:1-10, you will see that it was considered a shameful thing for a brother to refuse to marry his brother’s widow. So the judgment here would be not on her, but on the man who ‘is not her husband.’

Others have made much out of the fact that she was drawing water at nearly noon when most women drew water in the early morning. It has been implied that she was avoiding the other women because of her shame, that she was not respected.

But the truth is that jars get spilled or broken, or a neighbor is in need, and there are many reasons for returning to the well for more water. Sometimes, a woman might just want a break from the household business.

And, this is John who I believe, intends to contrast the story of this woman to the one of Nicodemus. He came at night. She came at noon.

At some level, she was already enlightened.

(Because those who are cast out are more open to the upside down kin-dom of God than those who are on the inside.)

Clearly this woman whose name we do not know, was respected by her neighbors; they certainly didn’t shun her when she started to tell them about Jesus. So influential was she that they ignored their animosity toward Jews to believe that Jesus was, indeed the Messiah.

An impressive woman, this!

She has enough confidence to ask questions of this Jewish man who asks her for a drink. Something not done on a usual basis. Engaging in dialogue as an equal, or as a familiar. Certainly impolite. Cheeky. Irregular. Out of order. Overstepping her limits. Beyond the bounds.

She may even be putting him in his place a little by asking the question . . . along the lines of – hey, you don’t have much to do with ‘my kind’ – Who are you to ask me? Get your own water!

Jesus, always moved by courageous risk takers, and turned off by timidity and lukewarm attitudes, seems to really take to this confident female. As I have said, this is the lengthiest dialogue recorded between Jesus and anyone.

Nick at Night, No-name at Noon

It turns out she is quite the theologian and an eloquent spokesperson for her people. She and Jesus seem to be sizing each other up across ancient boundaries, as they speak from their own traditions to one another in the Greek plural.

She says: “Ya’ll (or you Jews) say that the place where it is necessary to worship is in Jerusalem.” and he responds:

“The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will ya’ll (you Samaritans) worship.”

By the time this gospel was written, not only had the temple of the Samaritans at Gerizim long been destroyed, but so had the temple at Jerusalem, which fell between Jesus’ death and the writing of the gospel.

At the time this gospel was written, Judaism was reformulating its understanding of authentic worship.

Judaism was also having to figure out its what was and what was not Jewish.

These Jews who were now followers of the ‘Way’ of Jesus, had rejected dietary laws, didn’t see a need for circumcision of converts, and dismissed enough traditions that boundaries had to be considered.

Those who were more traditional had to establish some rules, some guidelines. Dying institutions spend a lot of time writing new rules. It can be a sign that something new is going to be born.

(But that would require faith in God . . . trust in the One who can bring water out of rocks and life out of death.)

It is never easy to do define new boundaries – especially from a reactionary position. Rules at that point are often overly strict, and punitive. And often cold, especially to those who are excluded when the gates are slammed shut. The community to whom John related was still reeling from being considered no longer within the circle. They had been cast out.

That explains a lot about much of the anti-Semitic tone in John.

Even if the temples had been standing, John and his folks would not have been welcome in either one.

But what Jesus is saying in the gospel is that a temple is not needed for worship – that authentic worship is in spirit and truth. John gives the community the confidence that worship in the synagogue of Jesus’ followers honors the God of the Jewish people, from whom salvation comes. Because of the pain of the split, John is critical of the synagogues that were not hospitable to the Jesus movement, just as he was critical of the Pharisees and Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. In John’s account, Nicodemus remains clueless, in the dark, unable to see the new thing God is doing.

And this outsider, this Samaritan woman gets who Jesus is and what Jesus means by the offer of living water.

But Jesus was metaphorically tearing down the walls, enlarging the circles: breaking down the barriers.

It is important for us to remember that the deepest values of spirit and truth can be embodied in Christian worship, and in the synagogue, and in a mosque, and beyond.

Nick at Night, No-name at Noon

To be clear about who we are and what we believe does not mean we get an exclusive claim on the worship of God. Indeed, if we take Jesus seriously, we will honor all attempts to worship the one God with many names by all who seek to worship in spirit and in truth.

But, because this is John, there may, indeed be more going on here, especially given this discussion of nationalism and worship.

Just who might the five former husbands be?

Jim Douglas of Sojourners says this:

“Could Jesus be alluding not to her personal sex life but to Samaria's past, in which five nations have colonized and intermarried with Samaritans (2 Kings 17:24-34)? And could "the one you have now who is not your husband" in fact be Rome, a colonial power with whom the Samaritans lived (more intimately than with Judeans) but did not intermarry as much as with the previous five?

The author of the fourth gospel identifies this Samaritan woman as the first apostle to her people. Like the apostles in the synoptic gospels who left nets, boats, parents, and a tax station, the Samaritan woman leaves her water jar at the well and goes off to evangelize her city.

But then might not Jesus' scandalized male disciples, astonished to find him speaking with a woman, be the author's allusion to her own church and some of its male members' wonderment at the women disciples alongside them to whom Jesus was continuing to speak?

Who in fact is the anonymous author of this fourth gospel in which a Samaritan woman, Martha and Mary, and Mary Magdalene have such leading roles and such extraordinary conversations with Jesus? Would a male disciple have even been able to write such dialogues?

Or in terms of a gospel proclaimed by the Samaritan apostle, are such limits just as outdated as the division between Judeans and Samaritans?”

There is, I think, more here, in terms of to whom we turn for rescue, for security, for water when we thirst.

To whom are we wed?

To whom do we turn in our hour of need, of thirst?

God waits for us to turn and trust in God's providence.

As Romans says, “God's love has been poured into our hearts.” Yet the reality of God's redemptive grace is the point here, and how it changes our lives. Because to live with faith in God at all times is to have a quality of life that is able to endure whatever life may throw our way – beyond endurance to joy. Joy, not a giggling happiness, but a deep sense of God's providence.

There was something new happening in Jesus. He was proclaiming something beyond what political, economic and even religious solutions had never been able to offer.

The new age fulfilled in the presence of Jesus breaks down barriers. No longer are Jews and Samaritans, males and females, to be thought of in isolated, segregated categories.

Nick at Night, No-name at Noon

Salvation comes “from the Jews” but something new has occurred in Jesus. Samaritans confess him as the “Savior of the world” Worship is centered no longer in places like the Jerusalem Temple or Mount Gerizim. The sweeping, inclusive character of Jesus’ mission is a note that needs sounding again and again today. Rebuilding walls seems so much easier than tearing them down.

But don’t miss the iconoclasm in this text.

Jesus threw the gates wide open and welcomed all to the well of living water.

The Rev. Susan Quinn Bryan
Pastor, Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church
February 23, 2008

Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church
103 William Howard Taft Road
Cincinnati, OH 45219
(513) 281-5945
<http://www.mtauburnpresby.org>