

Life from the Inside Out

- Psalms 95 *O that today you would listen to God's voice!*
Exodus 17:1-7 *[Moses] called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"*
Romans 5:1-5 *...hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*
John 4:5-26 *'The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'*

Our scripture readings this week offer us—excuse the pun—a flood of water stories and images.

The Israelites are following Moses around in the desert after they have been liberated from Egypt. Now they are thirsty and there is no water in sight. So they start hammering on Moses: Did you bring us out of Egypt just to die of thirst out here in the middle of nowhere? Moses gets fed up with the complaining and complains to God. God is beginning to get fed up with folks who can't even appreciate that they are no longer suffering in slavery. God tells Moses to strike a rock with his staff and water gushes out. This story is told without the glow of a miracle. There is something forlorn about the whole business. The story ends with Moses giving the place two names that refer to the people's testing God and their complaining and quarreling.

Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama says that God kept the Israelites out in the desert for forty years to teach one lesson [*Three Mile an Hour God*]. This seems terribly inefficient, says Koyama. Forty years to teach one lesson? It is because the lesson is so important and because it just takes us so long to learn it. The lesson is putting our relationship with God at the center of our lives in trusting faith. We are socialized in a culture built on the belief that life comes from the material, from what is outside of us. It takes us many years to learn differently, to turn to the inner life. Life is meant to be lived from the inside out. Or as Jesus put it to the Tempter (Lk. 4:3-4), quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, "Human beings do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from God." The resonance to that word is the inner life, the human heart, the soul—however we choose to name that "center" of who we are.

Paul talks about what God has done for us in Christ. In Christ the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit. What a vivid image! This is the source of an endurance that enables us to experience suffering without becoming bitter. This indwelling of God's love is the source of our hope and our joy. Not our

achievements or accomplishments. Even our shortcomings, our sins, our imperfections can't stand in the way of the love that God has poured into the core of our being.

Jesus takes an unexpected route right through Samaritan territory. He encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. He breaks social and religious practices in three ways: (1) he talks to a Samaritan; (2) he talks to a woman; and (3) he evidently plans to drink from HER bucket. Samaritans and Jews particularly of the south where Jesus comes from hated each other. Samaritans were considered half-breed irreligious sorts who had at times collaborated with the enemies of the Southern Kingdom [Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*]. Women were not to be in the company of a rabbi, especially a Samaritan woman with a southern rabbi. And, as the text notes in parentheses, Jews and Samaritans don't share things. Samaritans were considered ritually impure, in the same class with swine, animal carcasses, and lepers. If you touched them, you were as far from God as they.

This scene is one of the most radical statements about what God's love is doing in and through Jesus. Jesus has cut through all the prejudice, fear, and narrow-mindedness of religion. The barriers are collapsing all over the place. Jesus has something more crucial on his mind—awakening people to their relationship with the living, loving God. Jesus meets this Samaritan woman as a human being who, like all of us, needs to know that we don't live by bread alone and that God's love is poured into our hearts.

The woman is confused. Jesus talks about "living water," and she says, sure, I'd rather have "flowing water" than this standing well water. That would be more refreshing. When he talks about the "water that will permanently quench the thirst and will "gush up to eternal life," she says, sure, I'd really like to have that water. Then I won't have to come out here every day. Who wouldn't prefer indoor plumbing. Indoor plumbing is exactly what Jesus is talking about. The life in us that never gives out because it is our relationship with God.

The woman finally begins to get the picture after Jesus gets into her past. She is astounded that he knows everything about her and doesn't want to have her stoned or something. He doesn't reject her at all. Instead, he reveals to her that he is the Messiah, the one who brings God's saving love.

So how can we get a handle on these images of thirst and wells and water? I suggest we don't try too hard to "get a handle" on it all but simply to let these images speak to our own hearts and lives. They can illuminate our own lives, the ways we mistake the outward as more important than the inward, the times we experience the upholding and joyful reality of God's love poured into our hearts, or the ways we have experienced the barriers of prejudice, fear, and hostility collapse in our own hearts.

Let me share a story. It is about a man who was young like me “back in the day.” I was in my first pastorate in Kentucky when he and his fiancé came to ask me to perform their wedding. We met together for several weeks in preparation. David and his fiancé were interesting and energetic young people. They were heavy into skydiving and tried—half-jokingly—to persuade me to do a mid-air ceremony. I told them I’d be glad to wait in the church parking lot for them to float down. There was something about David that concerned me, though. A kind of edginess and anxiousness that signaled a disconnectedness in himself. He was genuinely friendly and warm. But there was still this aura of intense unsettledness about him.

The wedding came and the couple went their way. I did not see or hear from them until about two years later when David resurfaced. He called me one day and asked if we could talk. When we met, he filled me in on his life, especially the time since the wedding. The marriage had deteriorated into divorce. He had suffered a breakdown and was hospitalized for a while. After that he had gone on an extended retreat to the Abbey of Gethsemani, near Bardstown, Kentucky. David, who had grown up Catholic, had been away from the church and his faith for many years. We had talked some about this when we first met and I had shared with him about Thomas Merton who had lived at Gethsemani as a monk. I have always found Merton a good referral for Catholics who have been disaffected or disconnected from their faith, as well as non-Catholics, too.

It was his retreat at Gethsemani that had begun to reconnect David not just to the church but more importantly to something inside himself. He returned to Lexington and got involved in one of the more progressive parishes. He was in a weekly class on the spiritual life to which he invited me. I went with him one evening and saw that this was indeed a very sound and beneficial experience for him. He was discovering within himself a real and life-giving relationship with God. David still had a kind of energy and restlessness about him, but it was different now, more full of life, not anxious and troubled. He now had the aura of one who was coming home to himself and to God.

That is what, I think, these readings are pointing to. They help us to reflect on ourselves as persons created to live out of an inner relationship or connection with the very Power that made us and the world, with God. Until we discover and re-orient ourselves to that center, we wander in all kinds of deserts and are subject to estrangement from ourselves and others. Instead of living from the outside in, searching outside and around ourselves for something that will fulfill us, that will give us that sense of belonging, we discover that we are made to live from the inside out, from that deep core of our being that we call soul, or spirit, or heart.

How often we forget this! We wander off into the desert of achieving, consuming, grasping onto people and experiences, and wonder why we get so thirsty. Maybe just one more experience or

accomplishment or affirmation from someone will do the trick and keep us going. Maybe even water from a rock. We look for miracles, you know, for God to do something “out there” that will slake our thirst. But the water we are seeking is not “out there” but “in here.” It is the gift of God’s love already poured into our hearts in Christ. It is the inward wellspring of our relationship with God that is a spring of water leaping up to eternal life, life that is full and meaningful now as well as forever.

This is why what we call our inward journey is the most important work of our lives. It is a turning inward that is not a turning away from life but toward God and life as God’s gift and creation. It is out of that encounter with God in ourselves that the outward journey of service and giving for the sake of the world arises. If we are truly on that inward journey of uncovering in ourselves the well of living water, we don’t need to fear that we might be withdrawing from other people and the real needs of the world. The wellspring we find in ourselves is the living water of God’s compassion and love for us and for the world. The love with which God loves us will become the very shape of our own living in the world.

Why is this inward journey a matter of discipline? Why is it a matter of our making a commitment to it and working with it through the dry spells and turmoils of our lives? Because we are immersed in a culture, a human world that is so distracting from what is really real, that confuses us constantly about who we really are. Without daily encountering God in a time of extended silence, reflection, study, and prayer, we keep wandering around in the desert, making no progress in learning that one all-important lesson—loving and trusting God above all else. Living from the inside out, not the outside in.

Not long after we moved to Lynchburg from Lexington, Kentucky, I received from a member of my former church a letter to the editor of the city newspaper. It was written by a friend of David’s who spoke of his death. He was skydiving one day and his chute failed to open. The friend wrote simply and in a touching way about someone she had come to know as a deeply kind, generous, and compassionate person.

I was shocked by the terrible thought of David’s plummeting to his death. And yet, another feeling arose in me. It was an image of David falling into God’s arms, the God who would have been there anyway. But he had come to know that God, had come home to that God even before he came home finally. Howard Thurman, the African American theologian, teacher, and mystic, wrote about an Island of Peace within our souls. How tragic it is, he said, when we do not seek that island, when we do not establish it in our souls. The love poured into our hearts. The spring of water leaping up to eternal life. How blessed life becomes when we do find it. David found it. We can all find it. It is the most important discovery of our lives.