

3-19-17 "A Living Water Drought" A Reflection on John 4:5-42, by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

"Sir, give me some of that living water..." says the Samaritan woman when she hardly has a clue as to who Jesus is and hardly has a clue what Jesus brings into the world; but I have to say, that prayer, her prayer, is my prayer and I pray it all the time! Not that she stole it from me or anything; I rather stole it from her. Not that I'm plagiarizing her or anything. The sentiment is timeless, the need universal; therefore, there is no copyright violation. Which is a good thing because, as I say, I pray that prayer pretty much without ceasing: "Sir Jesus, give me some of that living water; Sir Jesus, quench my spiritual thirst; Sir Jesus, water my dry places; Sir Jesus, nourish my tired bones, remember my weary soul, consider my aching heart... dear Sir Jesus, I am tired, I am worn, I am in need, I really could use some of that water which "*gushes up to eternal life*"—really, like today, Sir, Jesus, today; and by the way, so could everybody I know!" To so thirst is to be human; and to have your thirst satisfied is to encounter the divine.

My guess is I'm not the only one praying that woman's prayer. Perhaps without consciously being aware of what you've been doing every day of your entire life, this is your daily prayer too. The precise words are immaterial, consciously recognizing the sources here in John 4 is immaterial, as I say, the sentiment is timeless, the need universal; and yes, that mid-day sun which this Gospel author of ours describes, is mercilessly relentless. Meaning, the need is pressing, the need is urgent. It's high-noon, it is high time—the moment of our need is always now.

Indeed, so timeless the sentiment, so universal is the need that our very human tendency to seek living water breaks free of the the boundaries of our Christian faith, indeed free of all religions, landing squarely in the realm of what is popularly called spirituality. To thirst for living water is being what is popularly termed "spiritual." Now, regarding popular spirituality, I'm not sure it is what it used to be. There was a time, maybe ten, twenty years ago that it seemed the world was awash in best-selling books and best-selling authors and in-demand motivational speakers, all actively promoting the merits and the treasures of spiritual questing—of locating a good drink. Successfully tapping our human thirst for meaning and peace and truth beyond the work-a-day, frantic existence which consumes us so, these same spiritual gurus were successful in making both big bucks and a big name for themselves. Now, simultaneously paralleling this phenomena people *en mass* were leaving their churches, leaving their parent's churches, leaving their grandparent's churches, leaving the communities of their roots and of their youth, all it seemed due to their unquenchable thirst for living water. Which from one in my position, as a 21C pastor serving a small struggling Church within an ever declining denomination, this is both tragically sad and tragically ironic. How could they not know they were looking in all the wrong places for what they most desired?

On my drive into my office Friday morning all of this sort of popped into my head—it's a preacher thing—yes, a sort of epiphany moment during Lent. An odd thing but there you have it. So I permitted my imagination to go on a

sort of journey while driving from Biddeford to Kennebunk. And I heard myself wondering just what had happened to all those spiritual seekers who were out and about, out there doing their free of all requirements and free of all restraints spiritual-seeking-exploration-thing. The thought occurred to me that we don't hear much of them anymore. And I concluded that the reason is that they have reached the end of their journey, what I would describe as a dead-end. Now I have no data to back any of this up, it's merely my best-guess-quasi-informed-perception, so bear with me.

When one begins a spiritual quest one sets out alone. The hope of course that any such pilgrim carries with them is that along the way they will meet up with other like-minded individuals and then have traveling companions to bear each other, encourage each other and show each other the way. For one on an active spiritual journey such encounters are inevitable, and rightfully counted as blessings. But what happens next is predictable. To be gathered, united, accompanied by other like-minded spiritual seekers is to of course find yourself within a community of some sort; and when such a place comes into existence it becomes necessary to in some way both organize that community and co-exist for the common good within that community, bearing each other's burdens.

Now, in a spiritual context, what is it exactly that we call such a community? We of course call it a religion, usually located in something called a church. And this is precisely the inevitable dead-end I mentioned. Religion, so called, "organized religion" (as if there has ever been any other kind) is what was rejected before said thirsty-seekers set out in the first place. Indeed, their rejection was their motivation. Their spiritual quest was of course spurred by their abandonment of religion and churches. Yet, to set out in such a way is to shortly discover oneself back at the unsatisfying beginning, having only traveled in a circle, and once again home alone; but this time drained of the desire to satisfy one's thirst. They've been there, they've done that, they came up empty, they remain thirsty, they now resign themselves to being unsatisfied—they give up. This at least is my impression. And for one in my position who is in the business of directing people *toward* living water this is both terribly sad and terribly ironic because what has been so brazenly dismissed is the very well from which they can drink most deeply, and be most satisfied.

As I look around I confess I'm unable to locate great volumes of living water being splashed around these days. In fact I would go so far as to say that there is plenty of evidence to the contrary, evidence indicating that we are now living in a time of extreme drought. I mean, true, life-giving, life-sustaining, life-enriching living water gushing up to eternal life is simply not the experience most of us are having these days. Not that the Source of living water ever runs dry. It doesn't. God of course never revokes either God's generosity or God's gifts. Yet, somehow, for countless mind-twisting reasons, due to a shocking number of incomprehensible events, for countless numbers of people, living water is largely more like a mirage than a reality. Those who are most in need of a really tall glass are having a really difficult time of it because not nearly enough people who are able to share living water are actually sharing living water. Instead of a world focused on

ensuring everyone, everywhere has access to living water we have, well, current events, gushing forth what I find myself identifying as “deadly water.”

So, let me ask you. Is it living water gushing forth to eternal life when the administration proposes a health care plan that increases insurance payment for the elderly by 560%? ...a health care plan which is estimated to remove some 26 million people from among the presently insured?

Is it living water gushing forth to eternal life when the Secretary of State declares in response to North Korea's recent aggressive actions that the world needs be very clear, all military options are on the table now?

Is it living water gushing forth to eternal life when the first seventeen people selected by the President to serve on his Cabinet have well over 9.5 billion in combined wealth which is more wealth than over one third of the 126 million total households in the United States?

Is it living water gushing forth to eternal life when the Administration's proposed budget seeks the most draconian cuts ever proposed, slashing hundreds of millions of dollars (54 billion to be exact) from the Department of Education, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Energy, the Department of the Interior, the Department of Justice, the Department of Environmental Protection, slashing and burning everything from Meals on Wheels, to Block Grants, to Public Television, Low-income Housing, the Endowment for the Arts to any number of international peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts?

Is it living water gushing forth to eternal life when 57% of the 2018 budget (some 650 billion dollars) if adopted by Congress, will be directed toward weapons of war?

Is it living water gushing forth to eternal life to propose increasing our Military budget by some 54 billion dollars when presently our Military Budget surpasses the combined military budgets of China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, India, France and Japan?

Well, I don't know about you but my answer is “No.” Much of what we're witnessing in the headlines does not in any way qualify as living water. Rather, we are living in a time of extreme drought. But the good news and the bad news is this: this drought is of our own creation. It is unrealistically fear-based, therefore unnecessary and able to be corrected. Moreover, and this is good news, there is no reason for us to swim in cesspools or our own creation, creating ever-increasing seas of rancid water flowing from wrong choices, misguided hearts, uninformed minds, bone dry spirituality, false religions, false gods, all due to the widespread rejection of living water. No reason. We can instead choose to model the communities we inhabit on the graciousness God extends. We can choose abundance and life for ourselves and for our world.

And friends, what the world most needs is located right here. Don't be deceived, don't be lead into cynicism, don't reside in despair... living water is available right here, right now. People may go dry but living water never

does. Living water is always located squarely in the center of wherever it is people of good will gather, wherever mutual concern permeates conversations, policies, actions. Living water is always located wherever universal health and vitality inspires hearts and minds. It's here, where Jesus fills our empty buckets, here where Jesus surprises us at the well, here where Jesus presents a drinking fountain that never runs with anything less than life-renewing, life-enriching, life-blessing water. Yes, right here—don't spend a second looking elsewhere—here, and wherever the most unlikely, the most shunned by society, the most devalued and forgotten are offered the very best God has to offer anyone, ever, anywhere—living water!

May our world only drink from the well of abundant life. Amen.