

The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain
Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church
Chattanooga / Diocese of East Tennessee
Third Sunday of Lent / Year A / 12 March 2023

Exodus 17:1–7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1–11

John 4:5–42

On this Third Sunday of Lent, all of our Scripture readings deal either directly or indirectly with the life-giving power of water, both literal and spiritual. In all of them, God is celebrated as the true source of this essential, necessary, and sustaining substance, again whether taken literally or spiritually. Before looking at the readings, however, it's important to stress that even literal water has immense symbolic significance. Indeed, water is what anthropologists and sacramental theologians call a *natural symbol*. That is, unlike *conventional religious symbols* such as the Christian cross or the Jewish Star of David or the Islamic crescent that have their meaning largely *imposed on* them, natural symbols have their meaning *inherent within* them, simply in virtue of being what they are. Nobody has to tell you what they mean, you just know by personal experience. Other familiar natural symbols that we encounter in church are oil, fire, bread, and wine.

Thus, in all human cultures water means life, cleansing, and refreshment, and so when Jesus says in John, Chapter 4, that he is the source of *living water*, he is using the natural symbolism of literal water with all its rich range of meaning to tell us something important about who he is and what he offers us. But you have to already know what water is in order to understand him: you have to have experienced water for yourself, tasted it, quenched your thirst with it, cleaned your hands in it, rinsed off a wound with it, even immersed yourself in it. Only then will you truly know what it means for Jesus to be the source of *living water*.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves a bit. In the first reading, from Exodus 17, we have the story of God providing water for the Israelites in the desert. The people are crying out with thirst and God tells Moses to strike a rock, and water flows out. But while this is a story of God's miraculous provision, it is also a story about the Israelites' lack of faith, which is why we are told that the place where water flowed was called "Massah and Meribah." *Massah* means "test" and *Meribah* means "quarrel." Interestingly, this is how the story is later primarily remembered in Psalm 95, namely as a cautionary tale about the need to trust God. In the psalm God says, "Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work" (8–9). As it happens, Psalm 95 is closely associated with Lent, and our own spiritual journey through the wilderness, not just with the Israelites but with Jesus as well, and not just in Lent but throughout our whole lives. We thus need to trust that God will indeed graciously provide for us in this time of trial and temptation, hunger and thirst.

If we then move to the reading from John, we have the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. There is a great deal to unpack in this long Gospel lesson, but I want to focus specifically on when Jesus said to her: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:13–14). Here we shift from literal water to spiritual water, from the water in the well to the water in Jesus himself. What Jesus offers is a source of life that is not external to us but within us, not water that quenches our thirst but water that satisfies our souls.

This spiritual water is nothing other than the very life of God—endless, eternal, boundless, limitless. In the very next chapter of John, Jesus says that just as God the Father “has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:26). My theology students will recognize in this mysterious claim the seeds of the doctrine of the Trinity, and in technical terms what is known as the eternal generation of the Son by the Father. But all I want to emphasize here is that this very same divine life that is within God is what Jesus offers to us.

I said at the start of this sermon that all of our Scripture readings today deal either directly or indirectly with the life-giving power of water, both literal and spiritual. If you look at the passage from Paul’s Letter to the Romans, I admit that you will not find any explicit mention of water. But in verse 5 Paul makes the wonderfully evocative claim that “God’s love has been *poured* into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Here God’s love is imagined as a liquid poured out by the Holy Spirit. Not only does this complete the Trinitarian picture that began to be assembled in the reading from John, but in doing so it calls to mind the way the Spirit is described in the Creed as “the Lord, the giver of life.” So while this passage does not directly mention water it still describes the Holy Spirit’s loving and life-giving gift to us in liquid terms.

We need literal water for our bodies to survive; we need spiritual water for our souls to survive. Unlike the Holy and Blessed Trinity, we don’t have “life in ourselves”; such life thus needs to be given to us as a gift from God. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit offer us this living water and promise to pour it out in our hearts, if only we are receptive to their divine gift. As we continue our march through Lent, let us open our hearts and hold out our hands to receive the living water from God. Amen.