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St. James', Mt. Airy  
3/19/17

Lent 3C  
Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 95  
Romans 5:1-11  
John 4:5-42

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

The woman at the well. The Samaritan woman. Her name has been lost to us, and so we know her only in describing her. And yet, what she has to teach us is nothing short of what it means to be engaged in the life of faith – a witness – a disciple.

What does it mean to have faith? To believe? To be a disciple?

Interestingly enough, each Gospel gives us a slightly different take on these. And of course, we now have two millennia of Christian history and theology to account for as well.

One of my favorite takes on what it means to have faith begins with having doubt.

Roman Catholic nun Joan Chittister, in the book she co-authored with former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, called *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia for All That Is*, wrote about doubt in this way: Doubt is when you start putting down what others have told you to believe, and faith is when you start picking up what you believe.

In this way, doubt is not the opposite of faith, as it so often is perceived. Instead, doubt is the catalyst that leads to engaging in the life of faith, to an examination of what we trust – and yes ultimately believe.

This process of doubt–faith spirals on and on throughout our lives, which can sound exhausting. After all, shouldn't we just be able to arrive at The Truth and be done with it? For better or for worse, that's now how it works.

At its best, the life of doubt–faith is an ongoing dialogue between us and God and scripture and tradition and the world around us – and because we change and our lives change – the nature of that dialogue, and what we take away from it, changes as well. It is ever evolving.

There are times when this evolution is more intense than others.

I remember when I first returned to church as an adult and began reading the Bible seriously. How difficult it was for me to move beyond the faith and belief of my childhood – how I had to learn to make meaning with the 'not nice' parts of scripture I had never read, as well renew my understanding of beloved stories. It was hard, but it was exhilarating.

Sometimes this process is more passive. Little pieces click into place when we have conversations, or hear someone offer a bit of insight into a scripture passage, or in response to a question.

And then there are the times when what we believe is knocked right out of our hands. Because life is like that sometimes, and I mean that in both good and bad ways, and it makes us question everything we've been told and thought we knew and believed.

I think that's what happened to the woman at the well.

She was a Samaritan, and Samaritans were enemies of the Jews. The source of the enmity between them was a dispute about the correct location of the cultic place of worship. For the Jews, it was Jerusalem; for the Samaritans, it was Mount Gerizim. The break between the two groups is narrated in 2 Kings 17, but their rivalry began around 300 BCE when the Samaritans built a shrine to compete with the Temple in Jerusalem.

So, one day this woman approaches the well to draw water, and there she spies a Jewish man. She expects to be ignored, not only because she is a Samaritan, but because Jewish rabbis did not talk to women in public.

But he spoke. He asked her for water, for he was thirsty from his travels. Thus began what is the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and another person in the Bible. And not only is it long, it is full of theological depth.

Jesus may have been thirsty from dusty travel from Judea to Galilee, but the woman was thirsty for knowledge. She clearly understood and communicated to Jesus the societal norms and history standing between them, but as they spoke doubt took hold.

He didn't dismiss her questions, he engaged them. He offered her living water and a sign that she was fully known. And when she dug deeper, seeking clarity from this prophet about proper worship, even challenging his authority over and against ancestors of the faith, Jesus answered her in such a way as to fulfill the claim we heard in last week's gospel when Jesus encountered Nicodemus, a story that occurs in John just prior to today's passage:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

Everyone.

In the face and presence of the Christ, those things she had been given to believe were knocked out of her hands and she was left standing there with the one who proclaimed I AM.

New faith – new trust – welled up within her and she returned to town knowing she must share her experience. *"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"*

How often do we need to share with others, not to have them validate our experience, but to share with them that which touches us so deeply that we overflow with the experience?

Whatever more she spoke went unrecorded, but it stirred the hearts of the people in her town so that we do know that *"many Samaritans from that city believed because of the woman's testimony,"* and they followed her invitation to *come and see*.

Upon seeing Jesus, they asked him to stay – and I love this word in Greek – it can also be translated as *abide*. Jesus *abided* with them for two days – long enough for the people of the town to come to also believe that he was the Messiah.

The woman who came to the well entered into dialogue with Jesus – with her doubt/faith/belief – and came away changed. She witnessed and did the work of a disciple. And through this was invited into the work of the community Jesus was forming.

For as Jesus said to his disciples as they sat by the well, "*Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.*"

It was, and is, an acknowledgement that we are connected from generation to generation in the work of God's mission – bringing justice, compassion and reconciliation into the world.

I look out and see, knowing that some of you have been here 50+ years. Some for less than a year. Maybe today is the first time you've visited. Regardless, when we enter this community we all join the cycle of "*one sows and another reaps.*"

Because this life we are called to, this community we create, the vision and mission we enact – they are the life of faith, always in dialogue and evolving. We do this not only for ourselves, but for those who will come after us.

It is the work of Lent to pay attention, to slow down, to pray, to mind the crop – to be intentional in our engagement of our faith. It is also a season that takes us through endings and into new beginnings.

Today it is my prayer that we, like the woman at the well, look up and around, engaging life-doubt-faith wherever we encounter it, deepening our relationship with God, and each other, as we enter into the labor of community that changes and transforms the world.

~ AMEN ~

