

When first-time visitors arrive at our convent there is one interior architectural feature that both grabs their attention and evokes their surprise. Whether you come in through the front door or the back door it can't be missed: there's a fountain right in the middle of our house. And it's a big fountain, twenty feet high, from the first floor through an opening to the second. Water runs continuously down a central channel into a large granite pool; the channel itself is set within a wall of bluish-green tile with a pattern that mimics the waves out on Duxbury Bay.

The fountain is the central focus around which the life of our Community revolves. We pass by it throughout the day, as we go to worship early in the morning and at day's end, or to meals and meetings. What a powerful thing it is to have a wellspring of water at the center of your life, to hear its sound, to see the light reflecting off the water. It conveys a sense of peace, of abundance and refreshment.

You may have noticed in the readings this morning how often water is mentioned, along with allusions to thirst and drinking. Water is essential for life. A human being can live for thirty days without food, but only three days without water.

The people of the Exodus were confronted with this dire biological fact shortly after they advanced into the southern reaches of the Sinai Peninsula in their flight from Egypt. Yes, God had miraculously delivered them from slavery; and, yes, when they ran out of food, God provisioned them with manna and quail. But now they're camped in a place where there is no drinkable water, and face the stark terror of death by dehydration. Little wonder that they complain to Moses: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" This is a completely sane question. Slavery in Egypt would have been better than dying in the desert.

And so anxiety turns to argument and fear spins into rage. Moses, perceiving a threat to his life, cries out to God in bitter complaint. Yet, as the people and Moses become totally consumed by conflict, God is present, bringing not condemnation but compassion. God gives a simple directive: strike the rock with the staff Moses had used to perform miracles in Egypt. Running water gushes forth, the gift of God. Not only that, God gives also the reassurance of holy presence: "I will be standing there in front of you." God is present; God provides. The question "Is the Lord present among us or not?" receives its answer. This is a story about the human condition. This is also a story about God. In the dry deserts of our lives God offers us living water.

This story is just one of many passages about water and wells in the desert, all of which set the stage for the story of the Samaritan woman in John's Gospel. This is a story of identity, of knowing and being known; it is a story about acceptance, and it is a story about discipleship. The conversation Jesus has with the woman at the well is the longest conversation he has with anyone in any of the gospels. Yet, it is a wonder that it ever happened at all.

Jesus asks for a drink of water from a Samaritan who is at the well with a bucket. Jews and Samaritans were not supposed to share drinking or eating vessels, a symbol of their long-standing enmity. He then engages in conversation with her, whereas an observant Jew was not supposed to speak in public with a woman. Which is why the disciples were astonished when they returned. The final indecorum is that he speaks with a woman of questionable reputation, which is exactly why she chooses to come to the well at high noon. Trips to the well

typically took place in the morning and evening. By going at the hottest time of day, she engages in a social distancing that protects her from the sneers, snickers and whispered gossip of other women.

We are not told why the woman has had five husbands. Some interpreters of this passage have made her out to be a promiscuous woman, a profligate divorcee, a first-century Elizabeth Taylor. Whereas the truth is in that culture only a man could obtain a divorce. And a woman needed a man for survival. While the nature of her multiple relationships is not clear, there is no real evidence that she was a woman of inferior morals. Most likely she had been widowed, divorced or abandoned five times and is now dependent on another man for subsistence. Let it simply be said, let it be truly said, that here is a woman caught in the complexities of life.

Above all, the story that must be told is of what she became through her encounter with Jesus. In mentioning her five husbands his intention is not to criticize or shame her, but to reveal how deeply he knows her and to reveal to her who he is: The Messiah of God.

She came to the well to get water, and there she met Jesus “who told me everything I have ever done.” She leaves her jar behind, as well as her rejection and shame and goes to tell others. She has encountered living water, has been freed by her encounter with Jesus, and goes to share this living water with others, thus becoming the first evangelist in John’s Gospel.

On this Third Sunday in Lent we reflect on what happened long ago to an ancient people traversing a strange and hostile wilderness; we hear about a nameless woman who goes to a well and is there promised water with properties beyond her wildest imaginings. We ponder these passages not so much to dwell on the past, but to gain strength for the present. To be a people who return daily to Jesus Christ, the living water.

In the reading from Romans, Paul writes of the hope of glory that is ours; and then, evoking another image of water, he says, “and 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.” So the water signifies also the Spirit’s infusion within the community of faith.

These are anxious and fearful days. The onset of COVID-19 brings us into unknown territory, replete with unusual experiences like quarantine and social distancing. In the past few days our Bishops have reminded us that we are not alone. In the seventh chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus exclaims: “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” Filled with the Spirit, Christians nourish each other. In the dry deserts of our lives we are to be a cup of cold water for one another.

The fountain in the center of our convent conveys a calming and serene ambience, an effective antidote for anxiety and fear. It is a powerful visual and auditory reminder of Christ, the living water by whom, for whom and in whom our community lives. By it we are daily reminded of our baptism into Christ. A Christian theologian of the 2nd century wrote that like fish, Christians are born in water and permanently abide in water. It is the water of God’s creative power, of Christ’s cleansing death and the Spirit’s infusion within the community. May we therefore, find again within us and around us God’s life-giving presence as a fountain of life in the desert of our days.

With credits to scholars Gail Ramshaw and David Garber, Jr.