

"Satisfactory Faith" (19Mar17)
John 4:5-42; Exodus 17:1-7

One of the enduring fallacies of our faith involves contrasting the Old and New Testaments. At times termed a heresy, while in current jargon we might label it "fake news," this is the false distinction that the New Testament God is preferable over the Old one.

The Bible as a whole portrays God in many ways, but claiming that between Old and New there are different gods or even different approaches is dangerous for reasons from anti-Semitism to idolatry. Mostly, it's just not a very careful reading. To imagine the Old Testament is nastiness with an angry God ignores, for example, the 23rd Psalm. And we wouldn't know Jesus as the Good Shepherd without that shape of earlier faith to point to him.

More to the point, today we'd suspect our prejudicial presumptions reverse themselves: the Old Testament God seems more satisfying than the stuff from the New Testament. In Exodus, the people got exactly what they asked for. They grumbled that they were thirsty and—*voilà*—they were given fresh water. Simple and direct. Sure there's some negative description around it—that they were quarreling with Moses and maybe threatening him, and were testing whether God was among them. But apparently it was a clear and direct "yes" as they got exactly what they wanted. Who hasn't wished for prayer to be so satisfying?

Contrast that with where we've been in the Gospel of John. Although last week's passage had the perennial favorite verse John 3:16, still it's confounding. One of our Lenten House Churches was noticing that Nicodemus not only didn't get a clear answer; he didn't even get to ask his question! Jesus instantly ran in some obscure direction with the conversation, and kept throwing him off by talking on a whole 'nother level. The discussion has no conclusion, so we don't have a sense of whether Nicodemus

left even less satisfied than he started. And yet...it's got John 3:16 and remains a favorite passage we return to over and over.

Today is a companion story with a bit different dynamics. If Nicodemus was an elite male insider with religious power stumbling toward Jesus by night, here at high noon an unnamed woman, a religious, ethnic, and cultural outcast, has a showdown with Jesus. Whereas the conversation continually got away from Nicodemus, this woman at least keeps pursuing the train of thought, even if she doesn't arrive at the conclusion she expected.

Let's wade into it. The reverse of with Nicodemus, here Jesus prompts the conversation. Coming to the well, he says to the woman, "give me a drink." In what seems an unusual role of prejudice and oppression, she has to explain to him that his religious beliefs and rules wouldn't allow that.

Jesus randomly veers to reply that she should've asked him for a drink. She responds logically to the ridiculous twist with one of my favorite lines in the Bible: "Sir, you have no bucket." What could be more obvious? It quickly highlights how different it is than the Old Testament reading's satisfying clarity. In Exodus, the people complained of thirst and were given water from the rock. In this story, the woman is told she should've known to ask for water and she rationally replies that this well has worked "well" (ha) for the hundreds of years since it was dug by Abraham's grandson Jacob, so bucketless Jesus probably doesn't have much more to offer.

But Jesus ups the ante. In southern Wisconsin he essentially says, "I'm a perpetual bubbler." The term "living water" just meant moving streams, flowing water, as opposed to standing water. Jesus says he's got an artesian well, bubbling up, like a drinking fountain, always fresh and refreshing, and—even more—will quench thirst not just for the moment but forever. What he gives "will

become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Now, let's set aside this living water for living forever because the woman, still mostly on her original level, pursues the practical angle. She says, "give me this water" so I don't have to keep schlepping out here and heaving and hauling buckets up out of this deep well. Makes sense.

But lest things become too sensible, Jesus suddenly asks about her husband. He somehow knows she's been married five times and is currently shackled up with another guy (as our terminology might have said it). Still in our culture—much less back in her time—that would almost surely define this woman. That identity would be whispered everywhere she went. And—we should be ashamed to admit—the places she would go would probably not include church, where the whispering would've turned to outright scorn.

Now, I want to skip past how the woman changes the topic—with issues of whom we worship where—for a bit of background. It's no coincidence this woman mentioned Jacob at the well. See, Jacob met his mate at a well. The local watering hole (so to speak) was a place of betrothals over and over in Old Testament stories. This is why the disciples find it strange that Jesus was chatting alone with a woman at a well: it looked to them like he was trying to pick her up.

We might agree that's what he was trying to do, but in a much more tender and intimate (and spiritual) way than a date. For society defining a woman by whom she married, Jesus is re-placing her to give her stature outside of those confining condescending definitions. She leaves her water jar, and presumptions and — evidently refreshed with living water—becomes an evangelist, a good news bearer. She has something vital to say to the people of her city, and they listen to her. Rather realistically, it's not that they celebrate her or put her on a pedestal, yet her role and voice is key for them.

Also fitting reality, it's worth noting she doesn't have it all figured out. Her message isn't "I know the answer about God's plan." She's still deliberating faith and still has doubts: it can't be him, can it? Yet she's confident enough to point to Jesus.

That sense of faithful "enough" is where I want to stop, about what is satisfactory (a word literally for making it enough). That seems crucial for faith, on whether you demand having all your wants satisfied, if you'll accept nothing less than water from the rock, or if your expectations are fluid (for a play on words), if you can set aside disregard and disbelief of what a bucketless God must not be able to offer, and set aside your own water jugs and preconceived purposes, instead to find yourself filled with something surprising, inexplicable, and so delightful, reshaping your expectations, your identity, your place in community.

That's not just in these reflections, but also as we come to this table where Jesus has chosen to give you bread and wine and himself, and considers that the ultimate gift. Can you possibly be confident enough to be satisfied with that?

I don't have a more satisfactory closing than what I heard in visiting with Helen and Andy Remington this week: "God may not always give you what you ask for in your prayers, but you'll probably eventually find out God is giving you something even better."