

## Homily for the Third Sunday of Lent, Year A

March 12, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: Exodus 17:3-7 (The Lord provides water from the rock.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 95 (If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.)*

*Second Reading: Romans 5:1-2, 5-8 (While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.)*

*Gospel: John 4:5-42 (The Samaritan woman at the well.)*

This famous story from the Gospel of John is filled with symbolism. If you don't understand what the symbols represent, you can easily miss the point of the story, and the dialogue can appear disjointed, suddenly changing subjects for no apparent reason. In reality, though, John has constructed one seamless, carefully crafted narrative, in which the woman at the well is not just *a* Samaritan, her husbands are not just men to whom she was betrothed, noon is not just a time of day, and water is much more than just water.

At the very beginning of the story, John mentions a seemingly innocuous detail about when Jesus arrives at the well. This is a symbolic clue, hinting at the true meaning of the story, for John frequently uses the time of day as a metaphor for *faith*, or lack thereof. Encounters in which Jesus is misunderstood occur at night. The physical darkness signifies the darkened intellect, which cannot grasp who Jesus is. By contrast, encounters that are revelatory happen in the daytime. The physical light signifies the light of faith, which opens the listener to the truth about Jesus. So, when we hear, "It was about noon," we know immediately that an epiphany is about to take place. Someone's eyes will be opened wide to recognize Jesus and his gift of salvation. In this case, it's not just *one* Samaritan woman who comes to believe in Jesus; it is the *whole Samaritan community*, which she represents.

To understand the seemingly convoluted dialogue between Jesus and the woman, we need to understand the complicated relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans. At one time, Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The people living there were Jews, just like their brothers and sisters in the Southern Kingdom of Judea, although they had become separated politically. The distinctive Samaritan culture developed after the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. The Assyrians, following their usual custom, expelled many of the local residents and imported people from five pagan nations that were part of the Assyrian Empire. And, — this is key to the story — the people from those nations each brought their own culture *and their own gods*. With time, worship of those five foreign gods mixed with the worship of Israel's God. Between these foreign influences and the separation from the Temple and the religious culture in Jerusalem, the Samaritans and the Jews drifted further and further apart, both culturally and religiously.

When Jesus tells the woman that she has had five husbands and that the one she has now is not her husband, he is referring to the adulterated faith of the Samaritan people. By mixing the worship of Yahweh with that of five foreign gods, they have ended up with a faith that is confused and no longer true to the covenant that God made with their ancestors. Recall how Israel's covenant with God was commonly described in the Old Testament as a *marital*

covenant. Jesus is using the same imagery here, except in a negative way. Lady Samaria has been an unfaithful spouse to the Lord. Her worship has become an abomination. Hence, this part of the conversation is not about the woman's love life, but about Samaria's worship. That's why she responds to Jesus by asking about *proper* worship of God. If they're doing it wrong, what is the right way?

Ever since the two kingdoms of Israel separated, even before the Samaritan culture came into existence, the people of Samaria worshiped at their own temple on Mount Gerizim, rather than traveling to the temple in Jerusalem. So, the woman's question strikes at the heart of the divide between Jews and Samaritans. But Jesus suggests that this difference will soon become irrelevant, because his sacrifice on the cross will render all sacrifices in *both temples* obsolete. The authentic worship in Jerusalem and the adulterated worship in Samaria must both give way to "worship of the Father in Spirit and truth." And, that new type of worship must begin with belief in Jesus as the Messiah. That's why the conversation next shifts to discussion of the Messiah.

The Samaritans, like their Jewish brothers and sisters, awaited the coming of this Anointed One of God — "Messiah" in Hebrew, or "Christ" in Greek. While expectations differed, the woman states the *Samaritans'* belief that, "when he comes, he will tell us everything." And notice, after Jesus declares himself to be that Messiah, she goes and spreads the word, saying, "*He told me everything I have done.*" That was the proof, because the Messiah was supposed to know and reveal all things to them.

When the woman goes to proclaim Jesus to her people, she leaves her water jar at the well. Like the time of day, this seemingly unimportant detail is highly symbolic, in light of Jesus' promise to give her "living water." She is ready to abandon her ancestral faith, which *cannot* give life, in order to embrace the eternal life that faith in Jesus now offers to her and her countrymen.

At that very moment, Jesus' disciples return, unaware of what has transpired between Jesus and the woman, and confused that he would have anything to do with her. That's a sign that they did not understand Jesus' mission to the world outside of Israel. They thought that Jesus had come to save the Jews *only*. Yet, Jesus was reveling in the newfound faith that he had just discovered among the Samaritans. To him, this encounter was deeply nourishing. As he explains to his disciples, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work." Jesus has sown the word of faith in Samaria, and when the time comes for his disciples to come back and proclaim the Risen Christ to them, the harvest will be ripe. A new day is dawning for Jews and Samaritans alike, and for anyone who is willing to accept Jesus and the "living water" that he offers.

We have all drunk from that well of "living water," for we have come to know Christ and his promises. What he said to the woman at the well was true. The water that he gives *has become* within us "a spring of water welling up to eternal life." St. Paul says that the proof of God's love for us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners. Even *greater* proof is the fact that Christ has given us his Spirit to dwell within us. Like the water that gushed from the rock in the desert, this Spirit quenches our thirst for righteousness and leads us toward eternal life. Let us return to that spring again and again, to drink of its life-giving waters.