

Lent 3A; Exodus 17-7; Ps. 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

It is a temptation to look at the texts from so long ago and think that the desert experience of thirst or the search for water is not a current issue. We take our water delivery systems for granted. Or if we are or have been sensitized to the need for village wells in Africa or middle Eastern villages or safe water supplies on native reserves we believe that it is the local governments who will provide speedy solutions for their peoples. Some of us know that water issues are increasingly politicized and that water borne illnesses can quickly decimate populations when precipitated by natural disasters or human intractability. It is also a temptation to spiritualize these scriptures in such a way that we have no connection to the physical realities of so many of the world's peoples.

Thanks to Jo Rowlinson and Brian Morton my Lenten book this week is I Shall Not Hate written by Dr. Izzaldin Abuelaish. A physician raised in the Jabalia refugee camp who has served patients both in the Gaza (Palestine) and in Israel, he asks all people of faith to make concrete actions for peace in the Middle East; some of those actions might be telling the stories of water shortages for people who live there. His biography is inspirational; an exceptional man with extraordinary vision he gives his readers a shocking story about contemporary issues of injustice. Deciding as a young man that medicine would be his way of healing the world's divisions he focused on reproductive health, delivering babies and helping infertile couples. Concerned about the broad view as well as specific public policies he even ran for political office. Three of his daughters and a niece died from shelling during one of the battles between Israel and Palestine. I am horrified by the conditions he describes and by the barriers so many face in a struggle for survival – so much suffering, too few voices about what might be life giving for all. He has an unconditional regard for human dignity and he has not withdrawn from advocacy even when his own losses have been so great. You may have seen an article about a recent event at which he spoke in Ottawa. I am wondering how we as a church can do more than sit on the sidelines and watch from a distance.

Various stories about our ancestors in faith describe them as a group of refugees traveling without hope or resources in times of great anxiety and danger. They lose trust in their leadership and lose trust in God. Complaints are heartfelt; why not abandon faith because the journey is too hard. They have too much sand in their lives, too little to sustain them for the long haul. Is God reliable? For what? Who notices the suffering? Why not give up? That is the story we hear in Exodus and we are told that water came into their desert; God will meet them there.

Only someone who has known suffering can write about the hard journey toward faith that we read in the letter to the Romans; encouragement comes from someone who has known the road and speaks the truth. Hope does not come easily.

The woman at the well – at Jacob's well established by a man who knew about meeting God in the midst of hard places – is a contrast to the story of Nicodemus who had come to see Jesus and consider things in the darkness of night. She meets him in the day time. The story might be read as an invitation to keep taking a vessel to the source even when we are uninspired or the well seems empty or we are too tired for the work of going to the deep places of our lives expecting something new. The Eastern Orthodox

tradition has given this woman a name and a history beyond this story. She is called Photina which means enlightened one. The tendency has been to read this story as a moral tale about sin and repentance, failure and forgiveness. Too much has been made of her personal marital history and not enough said about her engagement with Jesus and the faith that will engage a city. The story is not about immorality and blame and ethnic and religious division; the focus is on identity. Jesus sees her and knows her; she is set free to live in a new way. Nicodemus was given a similar invitation but we have only a nighttime response.

In the gospel of John the authorities could not see who Jesus was or what he was offering. At the other end of the power spectrum this woman sees him and receives what he shares – dignity and love of neighbour. Beyond her circumstances, beyond being defined by her culture and the patterns which separate one person from another, Jesus offers her acceptance and releases her into a new chapter of her life. The response to this deep knowing sends her into a city which is transformed by her witness. This seems to me to be the risky part, the sharing of our stories part, the house church part – the exposure of our true selves in community, the willingness to be known in our struggles with faith and with our own lives. This is the part about reading the witness of others like Izzeldine Abuelaish.

How often are we willing to be known or to know others? What makes that safe? Can we be so swallowed up by our own circumstances that we have stopped bringing a vessel for refilling? Dignity and respect for all people is one of the Jesus identifiers; he is sitting down, waiting to be given a drink of water. He has something of God to offer to us.

What questions are you bringing to Jesus, to God, at night? What conversation do you want to have in the daytime? Whose story will you listen to or can you hear anyone but your own self? I watched on the news last night as a woman came to tell her story to outsider reporters in a hotel lobby in Libya. Covered up and dragged off by security police questions by those who wanted to hear her went unanswered. The church is also responsible for uncovering the full stories of those who struggle. I am not sure that just listening is enough but I know that there can be no response unless there is true engagement.

We are also refugees from the past; we are trying to find our way into God's future. It is hard work; it does not come easily but we meet many of God's own on the path.

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