

# got water?

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42

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You see the ads all the time nowadays: on Feb. 17, 2009, your TV will go blank if it's not equipped to receive a digital signal. It's the end of the world as we know it.

Well, deliverance is on the way—and it should arrive in May in the form of a check for \$1200, \$600, or \$300 from that kindly rich relative, your dear Uncle Sam. Not only will that check let you keep inviting Oprah Winfrey and the cast of “Lost” into your living room, it'll also keep the wolves of recession from your door. Folks, the stars are aligned. It's a grand thing, living in the land of plenty.

Now, something about the government urging us to go on a shopping spree might just ring a bell. You might recall that the president had a similar proposal right after 9/11. After the attacks on Washington and New York, he tried to inspire us to the heroism of ... well, of getting out of the house to go buy things. *That'd* show the world the stuff we're made of. (Actually, maybe it did.) Take *that*, bin laden. Think we're scared? Just look at all these new SUVs in our garages.

Honestly, sometimes I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Such folly in these times we live in. But somehow we keep falling into it: the same solutions proposed for a variety of problems. Spending to combat terrorism and recession. Spending our way out of fear. But we shouldn't be surprised. In our culture, we tend to see money not as a root of evil or even of temptation, but as a fix-all. Tax cuts have been proposed as a panacea, too. “The economy's surging? This is no time to raise taxes to address unmet needs. It could stall everything. *Cutting* taxes, especially for the rich, *that's* the answer.” “The economy's faltering and people are out of work? You can't raise taxes now just to pay for programs to help them through. Now's the time to make permanent the tax cuts for the wealthy so we can get those people back to work.”

I don't know a lot about this as a clinical matter, but it seems to me that if you resort to the same activity to cope with whatever problem you're facing—even problems that are diametrically opposed to each other—then you might very well be describing addiction. Seems like we're addicted to the things money can buy. We feel like they can insulate us from our problems. That's why we like proposals that give us more money. But buying more doesn't satisfy our hunger. It only makes us want more. Kind of like drinking seawater, it only makes you thirstier.

So think for a moment about this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The two of them have this long conversation, initially about water. Or maybe it's more about thirst, just as when the disciples arrive on the scene there's a parallel conversation about hunger.

Much has been said about the cross-cultural nature of this conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well, whose name we're never told. She's a Samaritan, he's a Jew; the two groups didn't get along. She's a woman, he's a man; it wasn't proper for him to address her directly. You've heard it all before, so I'll talk about another aspect today. And if you've spent many years in churches, you've probably also heard the traditional, titillating speculation about this woman's

character. Oh, the many men in her life! But all of that probably reveals less about her own story than it does about the psychology of preachers who can't seem to let those details go. Puritanical pulpiteers just love to weave stories about Jesus and women of loose morals—even if it's not the women who are running wild, but the preachers' own imaginations. Such are the fruits of sexually repressive institutions.

There *is* something about fixation going on in this story, but it isn't sexual. It has to do with other kinds of appetites: with thirst and hunger, both on the basic level and as signs of something deeper. As the story unfolds, John sets it up by having Jesus ask for a drink of water. He'll quickly move beyond physical thirst to another kind, but the trap is set by this initial suggestion. Both the Samaritan woman and the first-time reader fall for it. "Where's your bucket?" she asks.

Then John makes his characteristic storytelling move, and for most of the rest of this story we have Jesus and whoever he's talking with—the woman or the disciples—using the same words to talk about very different things. The conversation goes on on two levels. Jesus asks her for water from the town well, but then he says he has water too—"living water" that will quench her thirst in a way that H<sub>2</sub>O can't.

What could she be thirsty for?

We don't know exactly. Maybe there's something to the fact that she's here at the well at a time when nobody else is. It's midday. Women fetched water in the morning, before it got hot. But here she is at noon. Why is she here alone? Is she an outcast? Is the reason she's been with so many men because she has no other protection in this society? Is she starved for acceptance, wandering through her own desert of isolation? Maybe she feels like no one understands her. Her response to Jesus seems to indicate that. If so, all those sermons accusing her of loose morals would probably only confirm her feeling that nobody really understands her; empty cups handed to a thirsty woman.

But somehow Jesus seems able to read her life. And her suspicions fall away. She wonders if he might even be the Messiah, the one she and her people have been waiting for. In understanding her situation, he has restored something to her that she's been thirsting for all these years. It's a telling detail that when she runs back into town to tell the villagers about him, she leaves her water jar behind. This man has quenched her thirst without a drop of water from Jacob's well.

"Everyone who drinks this well water will be thirsty again," he tells her. "But those who drink of the water that I have to give will never be thirsty. The living water I give will become a spring of water in them, gushing up to eternal life."

Now let's get back to this thirst we have to buy things, this hunger for more and more stuff. I've got the hunger. I assume you've got it, too. Maybe we've got less of it than some other people—my brother-in-law comes to mind—but we've all got it. It's not just an American trait to want some of the amazing stuff that's out there, but it would be awfully hard to live in this country and *not* thirst for some of the things we're told we really do need and should want. Besides, we're told, it'll help

everybody if we all go buy that flat-screen HDTV we've had our eyes on. Spending will prevent a recession, or so they tell us. And thus these checks, this "economic stimulus package."<sup>1</sup>

It does matter what you call a thing. That's one lesson of this gospel story. By speaking of living water, Jesus addresses our parched spirits. Words help shape how we think. Words open up some possibilities, and they close others off. What happens if we think of this opportunity coming our way as something more than an economic stimulus package? (And really, how wonky a term is that? Hardly compares with "living water," does it?) What if we see this as an invitation to show what we think is important, as an invitation to exercise stewardship? What if we think of it as an opportunity, a gift, even as an unwitting grace?

Once upon a time, not too many years ago, a pro wrestler got elected governor of our fair state, basically on the strength of two things: his formidable personality and a promise to give people money. All the talk was of a state budget surplus, and he kept saying over and over again, it's your money and you should get it back. Enough people agreed with him that he got elected. His limited mandate was "give us our money back." Many people here and in other congregations were involved in an effort to encourage people to think of that money in less self-centered ways. Did it make a difference? I don't know. I for one am not trying to start a mass movement here. I've come to understand that my talents lie elsewhere. Others have more gifts for that than I do, and if you want to take an idea like this and run with it, more power to you. Maybe you have the ear of someone with a bigger bully pulpit. A senator, say. Maybe Mr. Obama can inspire us to be the kind of change we want to see in the world. Maybe Hillary can use her effectiveness and experience to get something done. Maybe Senator McCain can prove the maverick by bucking his president again. And Brother Huckabee, well, maybe he can preach this sermon better than I can.

Or maybe you can.

Where's the living water here that can become a spring gushing forth with eternal life? Or if "eternal life" isn't quite the right word here, what can become an everflowing spring of a fulfilling one? It depends on what kind of thirst we address.

Now, I don't want to dumb down what Jesus had to say. He wasn't addressing the specifics of a check from Uncle Sam in 2008. But he was asking the woman at the well and his disciples—and by extension, he's asking us, too—to look beyond the hungers and thirsts of the moment. He knew the kind of hunger or thirst that needs immediate attention. He did, after all, start this whole conversation by asking for a drink of water. You have to address immediate needs. And I'm not even wanting to come down too hard on having a digital TV. I think they're pretty cool myself. But the next generation of TVs will be even more amazing, and I'll want one of those, too.

But we also hunger for something deeper than all of that. We thirst for something that we can't plug into the wall or drive down the street. Call it a sense of purpose, the need to do some good, some connection with others beyond our own small circle. And slaking that thirst is truly satisfying. Doing something that helps somebody else also tells them that somebody cares, that somebody might even understand. And it helps satisfy the hunger we all have of knowing that we're more important than some shiny new object that will eventually end up in a landfill or some industrial recycling line.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm intentionally sidestepping an evaluation of whether this is good policy. I don't think it is, but that would make for a policy speech, not a sermon.

Maybe you've already had conversations at home or at work or with your neighbors about what you'll do with this stewardship opportunity. Robin and I have. It's always hard for us to pay our taxes on time, so a chunk of this may well go toward keeping us current on our quarterly payments. Or who knows, maybe we'll break down and buy a digital TV. But we've also decided that a significant chunk will go to something beyond ourselves. For our part, we're contributing to a fund the local Muslim community set up to support the family of Hesham Hussein. Some of you knew Hesham. He was founder and president of the Muslim American Society of Minnesota. He died in a car wreck in Saudi Arabia last month at the age of 44, leaving a wife and five children here in Minnesota.

I'm sure you have creative ideas of your own.

A friend called the other night. He'd won some kind of gourmet dinner at a raffle. Some excellent cooks will come over to his house to fix and serve a great meal. He could eat the whole thing himself, I suppose. But he's inviting others to come and share this unexpected feast with him. That's the kind of thing I'm talking about.

My guess is that Jesus was talking about a lot more than all of this. Somehow, I think he was talking about the salvation of our very souls. But I have a hunch that somehow that's tied in with how we meet the sacred hunger we have for living a meaningful life. Beyond that, it's more than my limited mind can grasp, and there's merit in being silent regarding things you don't understand. So instead of talking too much about salvation, let's hold that topic and ponder it a while. And in the meantime, let's take this gallon of fresh water and pour out some of it to slake someone else's thirst at least for a day. By doing that, we'll meet some of our own hunger, and maybe some of theirs, too. Then simply pray that God will magnify our small acts in ways we can't even imagine and shouldn't presume to take credit for.