

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, March 12, 2023**

The Third Sunday in Lent

**Solemn Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector

*on*

Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

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## **God's love has been poured into our hearts.**

There is a theme that runs through all of our readings today and that is the theme of water. Quite literally, it flows throughout the scriptures and continues on into the sacramental life of the Church. The book of Genesis begins its epic story of creation with God's Spirit hovering over the face of the waters, and the last book of the bible, Revelation, ends with the river of the water of life flowing through the new Jerusalem.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear of Jesus encountering a Samaritan woman at a well. But this is no ordinary well, it is none other than Jacob's well – the father of the twelve tribes, God's chosen people. We are told that the well is deep, and it takes a lot of effort to get the water but Jesus does not have a bucket with him. It is the sixth hour – that is, noon - the hottest part of the day. Jesus is parched, and he needs the woman to help him quench his thirst. But at his ancestor's well, he offers something radical and life-transforming, for this story is less about thirst, and more about covenant relationships, true worship, inclusion, and grace. The well may be deep, but Jesus offers access to a spring of water gushing up to eternal life which, for the author of John's Gospel is a quality of life rather than length of life.

The Samaritan woman has no name and she, like Jesus, is at the well at midday. Why was she not with the other women earlier in the day? As we soon discover, she has been married several times and her current partner is not her husband. It is easy to think that this story is about redeeming a fallen woman but we need to remember that, at that time, women could not divorce their husbands, but men could put away their wives, and be married multiple times. Equally, the woman may have been widowed several times and passed from husband to husband. We simply do not know. For whatever reason, this woman may have found herself in an impossible position, and probably shunned by the other women. But she is not shunned by Jesus. Elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel, he tells the woman caught in the act of adultery not to sin any more. But there is no such pronouncement in this case. Nevertheless, the author of John's Gospel has planted very clearly, and possibly very deliberately, the idea of the marriage covenant firmly in our minds as we listen to Jesus and the woman talk about how to worship. And it is about covenant relationship, traditionally sealed with the blood of sacrifice, that is the key to understanding this encounter

Even though this is no ordinary well, nevertheless, it could never fully satisfy. The woman can draw as much water as she likes but she will have to keep coming back day after day after day – just as the worship in the Temple required sacrifices day after day after day. Using the enmity between Jews and Samaritans as his starting point, Jesus explains that true worship will not happen on Mount Gerezim where the Samaritans worshipped, nor on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem – but that *all* will worship in spirit and in truth. A new People of God is to be born who will worship as one people filled with grace that is the living water gushing up from within, their covenant relationship sealed in the blood of sacrifice that will never need to be repeated.

Suddenly, the woman is inspired to talk about the Messiah – the one who would save Samaritans *and* Jews. Here it is easy to miss the significance of his answer, for Jesus responds to her questions with three simple words – *I am he*. For the first time in John’s Gospel, Jesus uses the verb ‘to be’ to reveal his true identity, for ‘I am’ is nothing less than the root of God’s name revealed to Moses from the burning bush on Mount Horeb – and at the heart of all covenantal relationships. As we continue to read John’s Gospel, that phrase ‘I am’ will be repeated with more regularity as Jesus reveals more and more about himself; in our next two Sunday Gospel readings, he will say “I am the light of the world” and, then, “I am the Resurrection and the Life,” and in the Passion according to St. John, which we will hear on Good Friday, when the soldiers and the Temple Police come to arrest Jesus in the Garden, he will return to this very same answer that he gave the woman; *I am he*, and John tells us that when they heard those words, they all fell to the ground.

So where does this living water come from? Clearly not the well, and in any case, Jesus did not have a bucket! Of course, this story is not about wells, buckets, or even water – it is about eternal life, a quality of life, that comes through grace flowing from Jesus. It is the **sixth hour** and that should make us sit up and take note. Later in John’s Gospel, we shall hear of another sixth hour, when Jesus is hanging on the cross. At Jacob’s well, Jesus was thirsty and he asked for a drink; on the cross, we hear the words “I thirst.” Could that request be for all of humanity? Jews and Samaritans shared a common ancestry and read the same scriptures, but they were alienated from each other. Jesus reminded the woman that *all* people would worship God in Spirit and in Truth, something that would transfigure geographical boundaries, local custom, social status, race, and even gender, ultimately ending the alienation between humanity and God the Creator. As St. Paul went on to say to the Galatians, “*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:27-28)

There is only one source of water that will satisfy, that can break down walls of mistrust and alienation, and that is water flowing from the side of Jesus on the cross; water, mingled with blood, flowing from his Sacred Heart pierced with a lance.

How often do our spiritual lives seem dry and parched! How often do we yearn to feel God’s presence; and how often are we in need of God’s love and forgiveness; and how sad it is to see even Christians alienated one from another. Jesus is the source of living water; as we heard in our Epistle reading, “*God’s love has been poured into our hearts.*” To worship God in Spirit and in Truth is to be open our hearts to that love, and to allow that love of Jesus to become a wellspring of grace in our lives.

Words of a hymn we shall sing in Holy Week, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet, Phineas Fletcher:

*Drop, drop, slow tears, and bathe those beauteous feet,  
which brought from heaven the news and Prince of Peace.*

*Cease not, wet eyes, his mercies to entreat;  
to cry for vengeance sin doth never cease.*

*In your deep floods drown all my faults and fears;  
nor let his eye see sin, but through my tears.*