

## LENT: A TIME TO FOLLOW JESUS TO THE CROSS

**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**February 24, 2008**

**Exodus 17:1-7**  
**Psalm 95**  
**Romans 5:1-11**  
**John 4:5-42**

### **“He Told Me Everything I Have Ever Done!”**

She came to the well every day at noon, when the sun was hottest. The other women in the village had long since gone back to their households, lugging the heavy water that sustained life and health in a dry land – as millions of women still do, daily, in poor and developing nations all over the world. Coming to the well at midday meant that she could avoid the dulling pain of being shunned and frozen out of the cheerful group that would meet each morning at the well, to carry the water in the cool of the day.

Some traditional depictions of this story portray this Samaritan woman, someone who was very much an “other” to the Jews, as a sort of Bible-story version of our modern much-married celebrities – a “use ’em and lose ’em” character with all her many husbands, a “woman of the world.” But more recent – and careful – scholarship, that takes the anthropology and social structures of that time and place into account, gives us a different picture of this woman at the well.

Women were valued for their childbearing abilities. They could not initiate a divorce, but their husbands could. It is much more likely that she was “barren” – that she could not conceive, and so had been dumped by one husband after another when it became evident that she could not produce children. Hers must have been a life of disappointment after disappointment, with hopes dashed on all sides. The reason she would come to the well when the other women weren’t there is because they would shun her, not for being a “loose woman” as the traditional interpretations of this story portray her. They shunned her because she was bad luck – a “barren woman” – whose curse of barrenness might rub off, somehow. It wasn’t personal – they were just playing it safe – guarding their own hopes, protecting themselves from their own disappointments.

Then, one hot noonday, there is this man at the well and his surprising talk of “living water” – surprising that he would talk with her at all – and his talk is all about the water of eternal life, of hope and inspiration and encouragement and promise. Words of hope and promise – to one who knew all the bitterness of disappointment. This message of eternal life is not even dependent, as the promise made to Abraham was, on the reproduction of progeny. Jesus tells her: “Those who drink of the water that I will give

them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (John 4:14, *NRSV*)

What words of comfort and release! When she goes back to the village and tells the people: “He told me everything I have ever done!” it’s not because he has recited to her the diary of her serial monogamies – but rather that he’s spoken compassionate and healing words to her about her journey through all that disappointment and beyond, in order to arrive at a new kind of place – the source of living water.

This revelation is so overwhelming that she jumps at the chance to share the good news with the very townspeople who have disappointed her so much. The text takes note that she even forgot to take her water jug home with her!

Some traditions honor this Samaritan woman – nameless in the text – as the “first evangelist” because of her eagerness to share the message of Jesus and his “living water.” In Eastern Orthodox Church tradition, she has a name: in Greek: “Saint Photina” as in: “photograph” and “photosynthesis” and in Russian, she is “Saint Svetlana.”

This name gives her an identity. She is a “bringer of light.” She joyfully carried the “living water” of the good news of eternal life in Jesus Christ – the “Light of the World.” May we model ourselves on her grace-filled example.

This week’s reflection was prepared by Lisa Bellan-Boyer, Professor of Religious Studies at Hudson County Community College, Jersey City, New Jersey; and an accredited docent at the Tribute Center, a visitor’s center and exhibit gallery operated by the 9/11 Families Association, at the World Trade Center site in New York City.

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**This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Swaziland** – With thanks to God in celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Seswati Bible that has helped to raise national awareness of the Bible Society through reading competitions run by local media and radio, and with prayers for the successful collaboration of new partnerships so that Scripture needs will be met; **Mozambique** – With thanks to God in celebration of the Bible Society’s 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, for the audio recording of the Scriptures into Xitshwa, Txitxopie, and Xirhonga, and for the blessings that the *Faith Comes By Hearing* program brings to more than 120,000 people in the country, and with prayers for the launching of new Scripture products in various languages, and for the HIF/AIDS projects; **Malawi** – With thanks to God for the Yao New Testament and the Chichewa Children’s Bible, and with prayers for their impact, and with thanks to God for the *Faith Comes By Hearing* program, and with prayers for the progress of four translation projects, and for the *Operation Berea* program, which encourages communities to engage with God’s Word.

**Activity Corner:** In Search of “Life-Giving” Water

Supplies needed: Bible; newspapers or news magazines; computer with Internet capacity (optional); writing paper; pens/pencils.

Gather as a family and read Exodus 17:1-17. Discuss what it feels like to be physically thirsty. How must the Israelites have felt moving from place to place in a hot, dry desert, searching for water? How did God provide for them? In this week's Gospel text (John 4:5-42), talk about what Jesus meant when he said that he offers "life-giving water." Why did the Samaritan woman want this water? In what ways do you "thirst" for the life-giving water that Jesus offers? Incorporate your thoughts into a prayer, thanking God for Jesus, and for the "life-giving water" he offers.

Look through newspapers and/or news magazines to see if there are any stories about parts of the world experiencing drought or about places in the world where people are in need of clean water. Or go on the Internet to see if you can find such stories. Talk about ways your household (or with a group at your church or in your community) can raise awareness about these situations and learn if there are ways you can help. For example, some organizations (such as church or civic-sponsored relief organizations) work to dig wells or build irrigation systems.