

## God's Gift of Living Water

*John 4:5-15, Isaiah 55:1-11, Responsive Psalm 63 (Voices United 781)*

I chose the reading from Isaiah 55 this morning because of the word “Come.”

Come is both invitational and compelling.

“Come on in,” we warmly *say* when someone we’ve been waiting for drops by for a visit.

“Come on in,” we *hear* when we accept the warm invitation from a friend or someone we would like to be friends with.

If we listen carefully to both Isaiah 55 and John 4, we will hear a warm welcome spoken by God to come:

Come: to God, all – ALL! – who are thirsty for something more in life.

Come: to see all the peoples and all the nations of the world with their vast needs.

Come: to experience personal renewal and to receive Jesus’ life-giving water.

Come: to share in God’s mission in this world through Jesus Christ.

**When we come in thirsty response to God’s call, we also find ourselves invited by our gracious God to see the vast inequities, needs and hunger and thirst of others in our world.**

There are many people today who thirst for meaning in their chaotic lives.

There are many people who struggle and search, often with great effort, and yet do not find meaning or acceptance or love in their existence. Sometimes it feels as if they are merely existing rather than really living.

In John 4, the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met beside a well at noon one hot, dry and dusty day was such a person.

She was a person who knew exclusion not inclusion.

She had been denigrated rather than treated with dignity.

She had been exploited rather than empowered.

Then she met Jesus who spoke of life that was the exact opposite of what she was experiencing. Jesus spoke to her thirsty soul out of his thirst for a simple drink of water! And his approach to her showed his compassion for her and allowed her to experience dignity and affirmation that she had not known for a long, long time.

Jesus recognized the Samaritan woman as a person of worth, someone whom he loved because God loved her. Jesus’ simple request for a drink of water sparked an amazing conversation with this woman who had lived on the fringes of her society for many years. Their exchange shows us that Jesus does not want *any* human being – no matter how rejected by others --to shrivel and die from a parched soul. Rather, Jesus embodies God’s longing in our Old Testament reading to quench the deepest needs and desires of every human heart with the "living water" of his life-giving Spirit.

We didn’t read the Samaritan woman’s whole story in John 4 but, if we had, we would realize that this one woman epitomized some of the many ways that society still marginalizes people. And Jesus demonstrated compassion despite all the taboos that held sway then (and even now) -- gender discrimination, socio-economic poverty (any woman married five times was likely poor),

religious hostility and the moral stigma of serial marriages.

If you travel our transit system or walk our downtown streets or drive your car by various intersections in Toronto, you can't help but see people – women and men -- who bare a resemblance to the Samaritan woman. Many are ragged and rough. Some look clean-cut. But my educated hunch is that we wonder why they can't get a reasonable job, why are they out hustling for a loonie or toonie, why they can't get their act together.

I am personally in contact with some people whose lifestyles are morally questionable or who find themselves on the fringes of society. They have experienced all the difficulties in life you could imagine – or not. So when I ponder again Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman, I am provoked in my own spirit to respond with his grace and generosity rather than dismissing them or adding even more rejection or humiliation or meanness to their lives.

Jesus' invitation to the woman to ask him for a drink is also an invitation to us in our situations. God also invites us **to receive Jesus' life-giving water.**

In this encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman displayed deep, inner spiritual thirst. She was coy at first but, then, she was also honest not only about her past but also her present situation. And, maybe surprisingly to some of the men in her life, she also showed genuine spiritual insight. She longed not only for literal water but also -- more so -- for the "living water" (4:11) that Jesus offered her. So much so that, in her excitement about what he had to say, she forgot her water jar when she returned to town tell the townsfolk about him (4:28).

On my Facebook page, I asked some people this past week what Jesus meant by "living water" and if being thirsty was a prerequisite to receive this living water. One person quoted Jesus from his Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Yes! I responded. Thirst is important. God knows that too. It is not likely people will come to God if they are not at least a tiny bit thirsty for more in their lives. God's invitation in Isaiah 55 is "Come, everyone who is thirsty – here is water!"

Then, another person wrote to me:

"Sometimes we don't realize how thirsty we are until we actually take a refreshing drink and say "Ahhhhh!" God's gift of living water -- of truth that gives true answers to life's BIG questions and true meaning to life. God's gift of living water -- of the Holy Spirit who bubbles up in our lives – or blows over our lives -- in wonderfully unexpected ways showing us God is with us. God's gift of living water -- of real life eternally in God's presence."

Israel is a land that has frequently experienced drought. So people were keenly aware of water sources and water quality. Springs and rivers that ran all year were few, therefore, the land relied on cisterns to catch and store the winter rains and on wells to tap underground water tables. In Jewish and Samaritan culture, "dead water" referred to standing and stored water. "Living water" referred to moving water as in rivers, springs, and rainfall. Such water was precious because it was fresh.

The distinction between “dead” and “living” water explains why the Samaritan woman was perplexed when Jesus offered her living water (4:12). Samaria had no river. If Jacob had to dig a well there, how could Jesus offer superior water? But Jesus told her in 4:14 that the water he can give will become in the one who receives it a spring that will provide life-giving water not only for this life but also for eternal life.

We find out in John 7:37–39 the meaning of this living water. Jesus stood up in the midst of the people at the autumn Festival of Shelters and said in a loud voice:

“Whoever is thirsty should come to me,  
and whoever believes in me should drink.”

**“Come, all you who are thirsty,” God said in Isaiah. “Give ear and come to me; listen that you may live.” “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me,” Jesus said, “and drink!”**

What an incredible offer! And Jesus said this to the Samaritan woman. Jesus also says this to our world today. Whoever is thirsty for mercy, for forgiveness, for freedom, for joy, for hope, for peace, for meaning, for justice, for love -- anyone looking for life-giving water should come to Jesus and drink. Through the Holy Spirit today, Jesus Christ is still the source of life-giving water for the world.

And the living water of the Holy Spirit can still renew lives and bring the meaning and justice and love people so long for.

This is the same Jesus who, in Matthew 28, invited all who were weary and worn out from carrying heavy loads to come to him and find rest.

This is the same Jesus who, in John 6, said clearly in the synagogue: “I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be thirsty.”

This is the same Jesus who, in John 6:51, said “I am the living bread who came from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, they will live forever.”

This is the same message the Lord God said in Isaiah 55:  
“Come, everyone who is thirsty -- here is water! ... Listen now, my people, and come to me; come to me, and you will have life!” God’s invitation in Isaiah for the thirsty to come and find life-giving water is ultimately found in the person of Jesus Christ.

The persistent questions in my life are:

Am I thirsty for this life-giving water?

Am I thirsty for the Holy Spirit – and for the joy, meaning, affirmation, acceptance and love found in Jesus Christ?

Are you?

**When we accept the invitation to come to God, to Jesus, for our own thirsty souls, we can’t**

**help but see the vast needs in other people's lives. When we accept God's invitation to come to God to quench our thirst for true life, we will receive the life-giving water from Jesus Christ. And we will find ourselves compelled to share in God's mission of love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness and hope for this world, witnessing to the life-giving living water they can receive too.**

The Samaritan woman was a remarkable individual. In the beginning of her encounter with Jesus, she was a powerless woman. But Jesus had so quenched her thirst for acceptance, forgiveness, truth and meaning that she made a powerful impression upon her neighbours who had previously rejected her.

In his Gospel, John included an intriguing eyewitness detail about Jesus' itinerary. At the request of the Samaritan woman's neighbours, "Jesus stayed two days" more with them (John 4:40). The woman embraced Jesus as the Messiah and her witness caused many other Samaritans in town (4:39) to believe in Jesus as well. But more significantly, others accepted and confirmed her witness by stating:

"We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we really know that this man is the Saviour of the world" (4:42).

Jesus spent time with her neighbours and they responded to him because of their own personal experience and interaction with Jesus Christ.

The Samaritan woman also models a relationship with God that is significant for us today. Jesus not only engaged a disreputable, ostracized and foreign woman, he also found in her a sign of life in his kingdom and an ardent witness to his being the Redeemer of the world. In so doing Jesus warns us of any religiosity that turns a deaf ear to those who are poor and marginalized for whatever reason.

Jesus has in mind a sense of justice and social witness for those on the fringes of our society. The United Church has been on the right track when it speaks out against all that would diminish those who struggle for justice and who have great difficulty speaking for themselves. But we are also to follow the Samaritan woman's witness too of the soul-satisfying, sin-forgiving, God-loving message of the life-giving water that Jesus speaks throughout the Scripture.

When we are asked to come and enter his kingdom, Jesus is not calling us to merely personal peace and blessedness. That has never been his primary purpose. Rather, Jesus proclaimed that God longs to relieve the deepest needs, spiritual and material, of the morally, spiritually, religiously and economically least and lost. And Jesus invites us to join him in that mission and service too.

Jesus does indeed offer each of us the "living water" that is the life-giving action of his Holy Spirit in the deepest recesses of our being. In the beautiful poetry of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah (55:1-3), God welcomes every person, rich or poor -- all who are thirsty -- to drink deeply of what God alone can give us rather than spending our energy and efforts on what our culture offers -- wealth, jobs, prestige, the proper postal code, the best university degree, the latest diet

or mantra – that can never satisfy. God says:

Come, all you who are thirsty,  
come to the waters;  
and you who have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without cost.  
Why spend money on what is not bread,  
and your labour on what does not satisfy?  
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.  
Give ear and come to me;  
hear me, that your soul may live. (*NIV*)

And listen again to Jesus' invitation to the Samaritan woman -- and to us too, and for us to share with others:

“All those who drink this [well] water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give will become in [you] a spring that will provide [you] with life-giving water and give [you] eternal life.” (John 4:13-14)

My friends, may this be so for me and for you. Amen.

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