

Third Sunday of Lent
Year A, 2026

Ex 17:3-7
Ps 95

Rom 5:1-2, 5-8
Jn 4:5-42

Encountering Jesus at the well

Last Sunday, we reflected on prayer, likening it to walking up a mountain, where, as the scriptures abundantly demonstrate, God is often encountered. We pray in order to encounter God. We pray because we are spiritual creatures, who have spiritual needs that can be met only by praying. Because of this, we seek to encounter God, to be aware of his presence, to know his power and grace, to be in his company. And so, we pray; we climb mountains.

This Sunday, the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman offers us another occasion to reflect on prayer. That encounter is truly providential. It happens when she comes to the well alone, alone at an unusual hour, perhaps to avoid others, or for reasons about which we can only speculate. At the well is Jesus, who also happens to be alone. It is as if Jesus had wanted to be alone at the well, as if he had been waiting for the Samaritan woman to come. Jesus, alone, waiting, patiently, silently. The Samaritan woman alone, approaching, seeking, desiring. They meet and together, they are alone. To be alone with God. This kind of aloneness is an aspect of prayer that we cannot ignore.

At some point, each of us, desiring to pray, will have to strike out alone to seek God in quiet and solitude. Jesus himself teaches his disciples: *“when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and*

pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Mt 6:6). The aloneness needed for prayer is not necessarily physical isolation or separation from others, though these can help us arrive at the aloneness of prayer that is an interior disposition that knows that we must, at some point, reach out to God in stillness and silence.

Aloneness, though, is not loneliness. Aloneness is full of anticipation and hope. Loneliness is a burden that can push into despondency. The Samaritan woman is not lonely, but alone. She is actively seeking out the well and its water, anticipating the refreshment and renewal that the water will bring. She is willing to put in the work of trekking out to the well at noon, bearing the day's heat, to seek out the benefits of the water she wants. She is alone, and soon, she will be alone with Jesus. Alone with God: this is her encounter experience. God will speak to her, and she will speak with him, and never again will she be the same.

She goes to the well to draw water. The image of the well is found repeatedly throughout the Old Testament. In the arid climate of the ancient Near East, wells were oases of life, but they were also meeting places, places of encounter. Dug deep into the ground, the result of hard work and painstaking effort, wells are access points to life-giving water.

It is not hard to see how a well, much like a mountain, becomes a symbol for prayer. From the well, I draw water, the gift of grace

that sustains my life, washes me clean, gives me new energy and hope, refreshes my body, restores my mind, revives my spirit. The physical thirst of the Samaritan woman points to a deeper thirst, a spiritual thirst. This is symbolic of the desire for prayer. Spiritual thirst is what moves us to silence and solitude, to seek out in prayer the *“living waters,”* that only God can provide.

God has made us for himself, and we thirst for him, this thirst for God written in our inmost being by God himself. Through prayer, we reach the divine waters that alone can quench our thirst. Through prayer, we dig a well to reach the living waters, to reach God himself. Prayer is the digging of a well to reach the water that is God. Reaching God, this is the *encounter* we desire. It is why we pray.

And the Samaritan woman encounters Jesus. I wonder what was going through her mind as she neared the well. It seems that she wanted to be alone at the well, going there as she did at noon, in the heat of the day. From a distance, she would have seen a man there at the well as she approached. *What’s he doing there? Who is he? Will he bother me? I can tell from this distance that he’s not from here, Sychar, our town. I just want to get some water and be left alone.*

But then he speaks with her, and she speaks with him. The conversation seems at first a bit awkward and somewhat tense. Questions are asked and answered on both sides. This, too, is part of prayer. Once we are alone with God, this encounter can at first

be unsettling and unfamiliar, but before long a conversation follows. Spiritual writers call this the colloquy: it is a conversation, a dialogue, an exchange. Encounter leads to exchange. I speak, and God listens. But more importantly, God speaks, and I listen.

This is how the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman begins. Jesus addresses her first: *"Give me a drink."* She hesitates and does not fully understand. She is doubtful and responds defensively. Jesus is not dismayed or deterred by her reservations, for he knows that she does not know – not yet – who is speaking to her. He is patient, and kind, and generous. He offers her something that she could not have even imagined or hoped for: water that will quench her thirst forever; water that will become in her *"a spring of water welling up to eternal life."* Now she's all in. Her defenses break down before Jesus's generosity, and she dares to ask him for something for herself – not money or power or fame – *if you can give such water, please, sir, give it to me.* She asks for the water he promises, and all that it symbolizes and promises.

What this dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman teaches us is that what we ask of God should be based on his promises to us. Jesus promises living waters that well up to eternal life. So, this is what I ask for. All my other asks would be too little, too puny, too unworthy. What God promises, what God offers, this I ask for in prayer. *"One thing I ask of the Lord; this I seek: to dwell in the Lord's house all the days of my life"* (Psalm 27:4).

Encounter. Exchange. Then comes revelation. Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman about *"spirit and truth,"* words that open her heart to profess her faith in the messiah who is to come, the anointed one, *"called the Christ." When he comes..."* she says, full of hope and expectation. And then Jesus reveals himself to her: *"I am he, the one speaking to you."* This, too, happens in prayer, when the moment is right, when, after dialoguing with the Lord and listening to him, when learning what to ask of him and desiring it with all our heart, when God is ready. At that moment, at the right moment, he reveals himself to us: *"It is I, speaking to you. I AM speaks to you."*

God speaks to me. Isn't this what we all want to experience in prayer, God speaking to us? We want to hear his voice, to know his power, to possess his promises. We have questions, so many questions. And like the Samaritan woman, we know that *"when he comes, he will tell us everything."* What usually happens, though, is that when God comes to us, when he speaks to us or reveals himself to us, our questions soon seem small and quite beside the point. We end up letting them go. Why? Because the experience of being in the presence of God in this way is so *good* that it is all we can do to take in the moment, to be aware of the encounter.

Isn't this what happened to Peter, James, and John in last week's gospel, at the transfiguration of Jesus? Jesus the beloved Son in his glory; the Father's voice from heaven; the Spirit's presence in the brightness of the cloud... it was all too much for them, and the only

thing that Peter said that made any real sense was: *“Lord, it is good that we are here.”* God’s goodness engulfs all questions, consumes all concerns, swallows up all worries and fears, dispels all shame.

Isn’t this what ultimately happened to the Samaritan woman at the well when she encountered Jesus? What happened to her questions? What happened to her thirst? What happened to her hidden shame and sin? Before God’s goodness, in the presence of mercy itself, all of it was taken in, swallowed up, washed clean, and living water began to flow in her, setting her free from every doubt, setting her free to be an apostle, sending her forth with a word of witness, to speak *“spirit and truth”* so that others might believe that Jesus truly is the savior of the world.

Prayer is a well. Dig deep. Dig true. And encounter the water of life.

I close with the second stanza of well-known hymn, that is a summary of today’s Gospel passage.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say,
“Behold, I freely give
The living water; thirsty one,
Stoop down, and drink, and live.”
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in him.*