



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Encounter at the Well

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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When I was very young, Peter, Paul and Mary were in their heyday. They sang Puff the Magic Dragon, Blowin' in the Wind, and on their concert album they even brought a little Jesus into their repertoire with a song about how Jesus met the woman at the well. I had a sheltered Episcopalian upbringing and didn't know that anybody sang about Jesus outside of church, so I thought that particular song was kind of cool. On the last Sunday of Lent this year, we read that gospel story itself, and it was all I could do to keep from breaking into a little PP&M but that seemed so un-Lenten, so I restrained myself. But today, it's officially summer so ...

The reason I bring all this up is that today's story from Genesis about Abraham's servant, Rebecca, and the well doubtless serves as the model for the gospel story of Jesus at the well and generally introduces us to the importance of encounters at the well throughout the Bible.

I find that there are three categories of such encounters. The first kind involves the significance of encounters between human beings and divine messengers. We read about one on these a couple of weeks ago in the story of Hagar and little Ishmael saved from death in the desert, through the divine intervention of an angel who calls out to Hagar and opens her eyes to the presence of a nearby well. These are stories of living waters, which suggest to us the essential nature of our relationship to the divine—connection to God is just as important to our minds and souls as water is to our bodies. I love that fact that we give away bottled water, from Poland Springs or wherever, at the Jazz concerts on the Green every Thursday, but it would be even more appropriate if we had our own well right in front of the parish hall, where we could invite people to come enjoy a fresh cup of water.

The next kind of encounter at the well is more of a cultural phenomenon. One of the classic stories involves Moses, the daughters of a local priest, and some bully shepherds from a rival tribe who have who tried to deny the young women and their flocks access to the well water. Moses is an Egyptian, so this encounter initiates the process of his entering into a new culture, in the land of Midian, and he even ends up marrying Zipporah, the eldest of the shepherdesses for whom he has gained access to the well water. Water is a big deal in many parts of the world and the approach one takes to water can become a significant part of the local culture.

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Take California, for example. When Peter and I lived out there, water restrictions were constantly in effect. Some people followed them, some didn't. We even used to water out plants from a bucket we would put in the shower while it warmed up. Now granted that the winter and spring here may have been a little wetter than we all might have liked, but Peter and I have found it very liberating not to worry about water all the time, or wonder if we should report our neighbors for not following the restriction rules. I can only imagine what some of the proverbial encounters at the well might be like these days in California, given all the cultural differences that exist between those seeking access to the water, from farmers to developers, not to mention all the people living downstream who depend on the supply of the Colorado River. You would need a lot more people than just Moses to sort out that squabble and onslaught of bullying.

The story of Moses meeting Zipporah at the well also introduces us to the third category of encounter at the well, typified by today's story, the well as a meeting place, sort of like the first Match.com. In today's story, Isaac is grown, and he has apparently come to terms with Abraham over the whole issue of being almost slain by his father on Mount Moriah. Sarah has died, so it is left to Abraham to find his son a wife. He sends his trusted servant back to the country from which he came—that would be modern day Iraq—and the story unfolds at the well. Like Moses meeting Zipporah and Jacob encountering Rachel, when men and women in the Old Testament come together at the community well, it is always a story of marriage.

These three different categories of encounters at the well set the foundation for the great gospel story of Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman. The woman meets the divine and she is directed to the living water, something more precious and life-giving than the water that fills our bodies. Then there is the cultural element of the encounter. She is a Samaritan and he is a Judean. Today she would be a Palestinian and he an Israeli. A major potential cultural clash. Finally, their meeting symbolizes the marriage in Christ of all our human tribes and peoples. Jews and Gentiles become one body in Christ. This story illustrates one of Trinitarian formulae I suggested last week—The Source, the Wellspring and the Living Water.

Wells and Living Water are essential elements of our connection not just to God but to each other. Water is one of those commodities that belong to everyone, so that it should be freely shared. When people lack the clean water they need to live, we as Christians are called to do something about it. The Outreach Committee of the American Cathedral in Paris underwrote the digging of a well in Africa, and what happened afterwards was wondrous. People built houses and then a clinic, a school, and then a church. For a couple of thousand dollars, an entire community was created. Water was diverted to the surface and lives were changed in a way that we can't imagine. No more long and dangerous treks to find water for the women, no more disease from tainted water. No more isolation and lack of health care and education. I bet that the well has even become the place that men and women meet and continue the tradition of marriages begun at a well.

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The Bible also gives us wells as a metaphor. The water that comes from a well is God's communication, God's truth. It is Christ as the living water so any place we look for or find God's truth, word, or presence becomes a well for us. This church is a well, those we help and find grace in the giving, quiet moments when the din of the day fades and we can hear or feel something beyond ourselves. What comes from the well will satisfy and nourish. It will be food and water for the journey.

On your journey, God will draw you to the well for a symbolic wedding too—the encounter with that aspect of yourself that needs healing, yearns for growth, or seeks renewal. There is no better match than joining who you have become with who you might become, an instrument of God's Love in the world. Come to the well and drink your fill of the Living Water.

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