

Leave Your Water Jars and Dance

**A Sermon for St. John the Baptist's Episcopal Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Sunday, March 19, 2017**

Propers for The Third Sunday of Lent:

Old Testament: Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm: Psalm 95

Epistle: Romans 5:1-11

Gospel: John 4:5-42

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all that is, seen and unseen. Amen.

“Mr. Watson – come here – I want to see you.” These were the first words ever spoken, heard, and understood on the telephone; uttered by Alexander Graham Bell to Thomas Watson on March 10th, 1876.¹ With the ubiquity of cell phones, smart phones, and voice-activated technology today, it is easy to overlook the essential longing for human connection that resides at the heart of Mr. Bell’s first telephonic words: “Mr. Watson – come here – I want to see you.” A few, simple words – spoken, heard, and understood – changed the world forever. Perhaps each of us has encountered life-changing words which left us transformed forever – a moment of transfiguration in that sacred space when the human voice and the human ear commune. Having trained as a classical singer, I have always been fascinated by the mystical beauty that manifests when inspired sounds quench ears that are thirsty for new life.

Prophetic words proclaimed by prophetic voices connect with our deepest humanity and transform us. Like the moment I heard the recording of *that voice* from April 4th, 1967 of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Sermon at Riverside Church in New York City;² or the moment I first heard *that voice* of Leontyne Price singing the title role in Verdi's opera *Aida*;³ or the moment I heard *that voice* of my beloved grandmother on the telephone worlds away in Zimbabwe comforting me in the depths of my homesickness as I sat all alone in Boston. With Spring almost upon us, I am reminded that these voices have the power to call us into the change of a new season, and they resurrect the tired, burned-out, meaningless drudgery of life's daily routines to new and abundant life.

In this world, there are also voices that are not prophetic, words that cannot sing, words too bitter, shallow, brittle, and cold to be of any comfort. Indeed, we groan under a tyranny of noise. We ache under the burden of blaring televisions and radios, cacophonous traffic, and aggravating cell phones that ring, beep, bleat, and buzz incessantly. Cultural noise crowds into our ears, into our minds, and even into the very subconscious substance of our dreams. Today, at Jacob's Well, the Samaritan Woman teaches us again to listen, hear, and understand that "still, small voice"⁴ of God's Word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

Jesus speaks a few words that result in a paradigmatic transformation in the life of the Samaritan Woman. Jesus says to 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.”** Hearing those Spirit-filled words, **“The woman said to [Jesus], ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’”** Do you find yourself going back, time and again, to wells that simply do not quench your thirst? I think we all do. I think we all mindlessly carry our tired, worn-out water jars back and forth to places that, in our heart of hearts we know, only make our thirst more fierce. As the story continues, **“The woman said to [Jesus], ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’”** In the Gospel of John, we marvel and rejoice at the fact that the first person to whom Jesus chooses to reveal himself as Messiah is, of all people, a divorced, Samaritan woman: someone, in that historical context, a Jewish Rabbi like Jesus should have ignored! The impact of his words – spoken, heard, and understood – results in transformative human connection. What is remarkable is the immediacy of the Samaritan Woman’s surrender of her former self and her complete trust in her encounter with the Word of God incarnate. *That voice* at Jacob’s Well demanded

that the Samaritan Woman make a decision there and then. And what did she decide? Verse 28 states, **“the woman left her water-jar.”** That water jar was more than a vessel of survival used to carry life-sustaining water to her household. For those in her society that water jar was knit into her daily life, it symbolized her function in society, her identity, her duty, and her reason to be. Perhaps she was tired of being defined by that water jar. Perhaps she was tired of going back, time and again, to a place that simply could not quench her real thirst. Perhaps she was fiercely thirsty to become more than what was expected of society’s small-minded labels of: *Divorced; Samaritan; Woman*. Perhaps once her parched ears had been quenched by the Word of God she could finally let go of that water jar and leave it behind in that desolate place. Her thirst to become who she was created to be was quenched.

In the words of Charles Dickens, “We wear the chains we forge in life”. The ghost of Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol* is “captive, bound and double-ironed” with chains of “cash boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel.” He laments saying, **“I wear the chains I forged in life. I made link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.”**⁵ Ironically, the water jar that our Samaritan Woman lived by in Sychar was the very vessel that held her in thirsty captivity. The Word of God –

spoken, heard, and understood – liberated her to become who she is: the first person in John’s Gospel to recognize Jesus as Messiah and the very first evangelist to bear witness to God’s Word made flesh in the Christ. She cast off the chain of bondage that was her water jar when she heard *that voice* – that spring of water deep within her – the words of Jesus: a *language* that “makes all things new.”⁶

In the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: **“Language is very powerful. Language does not describe reality. Language creates the reality it describes.”**

What language do we hear today? What realities are being created by the language to which we choose to listen? *That voice* that the Samaritan Woman heard and understood calls us to leave those old water jars and those heavy chains we forge in life; to leave behind all the noise and listen instead to *that voice*; that “still, small voice” that connects with our deepest humanity, across all our lines of difference, and transforms us. In that moment when we know we must leave our water jar behind – much like the disciples – society may very well be astonished or even upset with us. Many cannot comprehend what happens in that sacred moment when a *life-giving Word* and our desperately thirsty ears commune. The good news is that “Crazy Christians”⁷ understand *that truth* completely. So, I close with the famous words attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche:

And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.

Like the Samaritan Woman, we too have heard *that voice*. We have heard *that* music. Let us leave our water jars behind and dance! Amen.

¹ <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr002.html>

² <https://youtu.be/OC1Ru2p8OfU>

³ <https://youtu.be/fTuvi2lgFSk>

⁴ 1 Kings 19:12.

⁵ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, ed. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

⁶ Revelation 21:5.

⁷ Michael B. Curry, *Crazy Christians a Call to Follow Jesus* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Pub., 2013).