

When I meet with parents and godparents before a baptism, I begin with a disclaimer.

I tell them that trying to explain baptism in an hour is like trying to explain marriage in fifteen minutes or parenthood in twenty: it's impossible.

Indeed, I'm still learning what baptism means, since I've only had forty years to explore it.

This living water disclaimer could also apply to this gospel text, and with prayers for healing and council installation and Communion yet to do, I get the feeling that I don't have a full hour to preach.

I see you nodding, which (for you visitors) is the Lutheran way of shouting "Amen, preacher!"

Understand, however, that even a full hour wouldn't be enough to do this text justice.

We are splashing around in an ocean of meaning, full of symbolism and spiritual wisdom, rich with lessons about who God is and, in God's presence, who we are becoming.

The story teaches us about crossing boundaries, honoring strangers, intimacy without judgment, where to find God, Jesus' power to astonish, Jesus' power to bring together what is separated around us and within us, our power to witness, and, of particular significance to this community, the ripeness of the harvest right now if we disciples would but open our eyes, and our minds, to see it.

And it comes to us in the middle of an overflowing liturgy, brimming with its own many stories and multiple meanings to share: truth, forgiveness, restoration, healing, hope, connection, community, empowerment for witness, deep, richly textured conversation and communion with the divine, who both chases us down at the local watering hole and bubbles forth from deep within us.

This is the beauty and gift of our tradition: it is a bottomless well of meaning and inspiration, of history and questions, a rich and endless source of living water for living our life.

And yet, for all of this, our congregation, our wise and multi-meaning worship, our Lutheran heritage, even our Christian religion is only a well, a place to come looking for water.

When world religion scholar Huston Smith was asked, given his vast knowledge of so many traditions, why he chose to be a United Methodist, he replied that if you want water, don't dig six wells ten feet deep.

Dig one well sixty feet deep.

Thank God for this deep well which has watered us and ours so reliably for so long.

Yet when Jesus shows up here, he pushes the conversation even deeper than our well.

*Church, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither in this sanctuary nor in Jerusalem.*

*The hour is coming when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.*

God is bigger, better, more beautiful and life-giving than any liturgy or gospel reading or religion, no matter how deep, can carry or convey.

Wells tap into the water but they cannot contain it all; the water table is too wide, too deep, too abundant to be held in any one effort of human architecture, no matter how remarkable.

Jesus is reminding us that God is here but also there, in and beyond the limited reach of congregation and category, in and beyond the holy church.

Still, he comes here to our well again this morning -- how is it that he, a Jew, asks things of us, the Gentiles? -- how is it that God shares humanity in common with us? -- yet here he sits, asking of us what we have to give, offering us more than we can comprehend, trading living water for well water, eternal life for a swig of our daily subsistence, a stranger to us who knows everything we have ever done and yet speaks to us anyway.

And the best news of all?

He has no bucket.

By the end of the story, of course, neither will we.

*Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city.*

She returned to the townspeople she most likely was avoiding by coming to the well at noon during the heat of the day, the townspeople who most likely knew her reputation only too painfully well, and she raced off to say to them unabashedly, *Come and see a man...*

She was gushing.

She was overflowing with life.

She had been transformed from an empty jar into a wellspring herself.

This is what happens when we come to this street corner well.

Jesus shows up and changes the dynamic, and changes us.

Hot and tired and bored with this same old hole in the ground, we show up to be startled by the One who knows us and loves us anyway, who pushes us beyond even our best expectations to a God who is wider, deeper, stronger, and more loving and life-giving than we could have ever guessed:

a God who will talk with a Samaritan woman,

a God who will take on our humanity and mortality to reach us,

a God who will stand on the rock and be struck until water flows,

a God who will hang on the cross and be struck until water flows,

a God who will burrow and dig into us until we ourselves are transformed from outcasts schlepping our jars and reputations here to there, day to day into gushing wells that spill over with life for the city we live in, no matter what we think of it or it thinks of us.

Come.

Be filled, and be opened.

Drink, spill, overflow, gush forth.

And then leave behind here whatever it is you've been carrying around and go back into the city to share.