

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (A)
Exodus 17: 3-7 Psalm 95 Romans 5: 1-2,5-8 John 4: 5-42
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The readings today are rich in water symbolism, of people being thirsty and of God quenching their thirst in remarkable ways. I think I would proclaim the longer version of the Gospel story; it's a "well told tale" and worth hearing. I don't know if this is liturgically correct, but I would invite the congregation to be seated and listen to the tale of the Samaritan woman. Read it slowly, and in the telling, help them picture what is happening.

People have always needed to be guided across desert terrain by the location of wells, going from one source of water to another. When a well is found there is reason for rejoicing; something we are doing at this Eucharist, we have found a well in a parched land, our thirst is quenched, and we are celebrating a thanksgiving to the Source. Those of us who lived in California during the drought years of the 80's know the significance of water--it is needed, essential for life. When it comes it brings refreshment, life itself; when it doesn't come, life withers. Because it can't be forced, manipulated, made to come on cue, water/rain has been a biblical symbol for grace, a total gift from God. In the South, where I now live, we have recently had hurricanes and floods; water is not only a symbol of life, it also destroys and is a symbol of death. Hence, we are reminded of the power of Baptism to destroy sin and death. Baptism connects us to the power of Christ, who through water, overcomes our sin. Through this Gospel passage, the preacher has a good opportunity today to preach, not only to the catechumenate, but to the whole congregation on Baptism.

Chance Encounters: The woman's life is dramatically changed in this story, and it all starts with what appears to be a chance encounter. Some things in our lives start by an accident, a chance encounter. For example, we hear a speech that moves us; see a television news story and identify with the needs of others; a beggar approaches us and we consider the poverty in our midst; we open a book at a bookstore, and it speaks to us. Consider the movie, "Dead Man Walking." Sr. Helen Prejan was casually asked to write to a man on death row, and it changed her life and the lives of others.

The remarkable encounter with her salvation begins when the unremarkable happens; the Samaritan woman meets a thirsty man by a well. The story might remind us that the world is truly, "charged with the presence of God". The wonder is that God comes in such ordinary ways, chance encounters. Someone else is at work in our lives, very close and every day, offering us opportunities for new life, new meaning and direction. Yes, water is a symbol of grace in the Bible, and this water bubbles up around us. Our daily world abounds with wells, opportunities for an encounter with the Source of Life. We first need to know our thirst and then to notice the water when it comes. For the former, we need to look to our own lives; for the later, we'll need to beg God for sight to see the wells of water that surround us and can quench our thirst. Jesus tells us and the woman, "If only you recognized God's gifts."

Jesus is speaking to a person who is doubly outcast: she is a woman and a Samaritan. Religious Jewish men would not speak to a woman in public, nor to a Samaritan. Her ancestors built a temple that rivaled the one in Jerusalem; this one was on Mt. Gerizim. Here is a scandalous moment for Jesus, and the woman notes it (4:9); he is talking to a woman, to a Samaritan, and he is willing to drink from their well using her cup. Jesus breaks through social conventions and breaks down barriers between people. God's grace is rushing like a swollen river towards all people, pushing barriers aside.

The woman has often been trivialized in preaching, depicted as a tramp and as someone who is evasive in the conversation. The Gospel doesn't say she is divorced, she might have been passed from brother to deceased brother as in the regulations of a "levirate marriage"; maybe the last brother doesn't want to marry her. Jesus isn't concerned about her marriages anyway; so, don't bring judgment into the text. How will women in the congregation react when they hear this story? Might not their sympathies be for her? Wouldn't the preacher be risking much if "he" made less of the woman's need, thirst and social condition? What is important is that the comment of Jesus about her husband's enables the woman to have an insight into Jesus' ability to see all things. Jesus is such a "seer" in John's Gospel.

She asks a legitimate question and may not be trying to duck the issue of Jesus' knowing her past. She asks a good question, "Where is the legitimate place to worship God?" The woman is to be commended for staying in the conversation

with Jesus, something we all need to do if we are to become aware of our thirst and what it is that grace is offering us. The ending of the story affirms the woman's importance: through her encounter she becomes a witness to Jesus and draws a town to him. Not a bad day's work for a preacher!

All disciples must do what the woman does; we must draw on our personal experience of him, identify what Jesus has done and share that with others who thirst "back in the town" where we live and work. Notice the readiness of the woman and the Samaritans to be converted. These are outsiders and that is where God's grace is most fruitful, among the rejected who have no external pretenses at dignity and know a good thing when they hear and see it. The squabbles of the past are impotent; a whole new thing is happening with Jesus.

In the Prayer of the Faithful today, be sure to pray for the fractured peace in Israel, the conflicts, like the one with the Samaritans, go back a long way.

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER:

Steven P Brey and Lynda C. Ward, *AT HOME WITH THE WORD*—1999 (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, \$7. 1-800-933-1800) This paperback has the weekly Sunday readings on one page and on the facing page, a "Reflection." There are also brief and practical responses to the scriptures under the titles, "Practice of Faith," "Practice of Hope", and "Practice of Charity." I find the reflections thoughtful and the "Practices" very concrete. Good for preachers. Good also for those who want to have and reflect on the readings in an inexpensive and portable version.

QUOTABLE:

Here's a quote that might provide material for thought on this Sunday:

"Christ's message envisages not only a spiritual fraternity [sic]. It presupposes and entails very important concrete behavior in daily life. Christ himself gave the example. The narrow context of Palestine where nearly all his earthly life took place did not give him many opportunities to meet people from another race. However, he accepted all the categories of persons with whom he came into contact. He did not hesitate to spend time with the Samaritans, to refer to them as an example, although they were despised by the Jews who treated them as heretics. He made all who were marginalized in one way or another benefit

from his salvation: the sick, sinners-men and women, prostitutes, publicans, pagans such as the Syro-Phoenician women. Only those were left aside who excluded themselves because of their own self-sufficiency, such as certain Pharisees. And he warned us solemnly: We will be judged on the attitude we have toward the stranger of the least of his brothers and sisters for, without our even knowing it, it is Christ himself whom we meet in them."

----- quote from, "The Church and Racism," by the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, November 3, 1988

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org
5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If

you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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