

Strike the Rock

Rob Gieselmann, Lent 3A – March 23, 2014

I may have told you that during seminary, I spent a summer in Uganda, working with my friend, Augustine Salimo – a Ugandan priest – visiting his churches. Augustine would introduce me as his American friend and ask me to talk about faith in America.

Well - Augustine lived with his wife Zelda at a little church compound – and he acted as a sort of *lord of the manor* – directing people to and fro. As host, he wanted to provide some of the American comforts of home. There was no plumbing, no bathrooms, so Augustine had someone build an outdoor shower stall for me, knowing Americans like to bathe daily. Water came from the river, in containers, carried on someone else's head. It would be heated over a fire, and then poured into a tub – about a gallon – and every morning I would find the tub waiting for me in the outside the shower stall. The water was precious, and I tried not to waste it. Maybe you're thinking, *poor Rob*, but I wasn't the one lugging water from the river. I wasn't the one breathing heavy smoke, a wood fire warming water for someone else.

Other than my time in Uganda – with one-gallon baths – I've never suffered the indignity of drought. The interminable California drought doesn't hold a candle to primitive water needs and practices in the developing world. But I'm trying to be a good citizen, and Marin Municipal has asked me to cut usage by 20%. I turn the shower off to soap myself, and I haven't watered the lawn in months. But what if you had to carry your water from the river? How much would you use? The Hebrew children had no water at all. Wandering in circles through the wasteland between Egypt and the promised land. God stretched their faith – and tempers – in *unfair ways*. They were thirsty; they threatened Moses; Moses complained to God; and God – who had cared for them all along – was befuddled. Don't they know I care? How could they think I would let them die? *Strike the rock, Moses*. He does, and water that has been there all along – they just couldn't see it – flowed freely.

Californians are likewise afraid of drought. A bit angry, too. Incongruous interests compete for limited water – agriculture, salmon, lawns, pools, drinking. Conserve water, everyone says, and everyone thinks to himself, it should be the other guy. I don't mind saying how frustrating it can be when I take a short shower only to pass a lawn where someone has left the sprinklers on – My lawn looks better green, too, and flushing the toilet matters a lot to me.

*California water use varies widely – Palm Springs uses the most – 736 gallons per person per day – Swimming pools, golf courses, and green lawns drink water in desert climates like a sponge. The Bay Area – with its cooler, damp climate, and its environmental sense of conservation, almost uses the least water, 98 gallons per person per day. Within the Bay Area itself, the tonier neighborhoods use far more than the poor neighborhoods. Again, lawns and pools. How green would our lawns be if we had to hand-truck the water up from the bay? And if you think I'm complaining now, what might I sound like were I to find myself traveling with Moses through some vacuous space between slavery and promise?

Take us back to Egypt. At least we had the Nile River and didn't have to worry about water.

Which brings me to this woman Jesus met at the well. Both were exhausted, Jesus from walking a dusty road all day, and she from a lifetime of carrying water on her head. - Women's work, - so finding a man at the well was surprising. *May I have some water*, Jesus asked - but the question astonished her. A Jewish man, speaking to a Samaritan woman. But Jesus never cared much for social stigma, and he *saw* right through her - Through her natural human obfuscations, the little walls we build around our hearts and souls to protect ourselves. Five husbands, and now a live-in; looking for love, I see, in all the wrong places. But the issue wasn't moral; the issue was human care. This woman's heart was as exhausted as her body, for she thirsted for love the same way she had fetched water, day in and day out, year in and year out, decades of being parched. But Jesus promised her, your soul won't thirst ever again. No more trips to the river.

And I think of all the people in this world who live in drought. - Seeking love in all the wrong places. - But here you are - people who have tasted *living water*, you have the very thing your fellow Californians seek.

The Samaritan woman left Jesus to return to her village and tell absolutely everybody, *I've found the Messiah*. And an entire thirsty village came to the well for *living water*.

Now - I know how hard it is to tell people about faith - especially here in Marin - the wilderness of faith. Yes, you might be embarrassed by church, with its often-dark history, so am I. You might be embarrassed by its authoritarian approach, or its irreconcilable dogma. - Me, too. You might be embarrassed to cling to arcane rituals - I understand. But you know what I don't understand? How you - or I - could receive and experience living water the way we have, and not share the water with thirsty people. To taste and see that the Lord God is good - People Marin-over are looking to you and me to find out whether it is true - To find out whether there is a God in heaven and on earth who might care for them. That's all you have to tell them - You've found someone who understands.

Strike the rock - and see the water flow. It has been there all along.