

*Wilderness Wisdom – Living Water*©

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42

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I grew up in SE Kansas, right on the Kansas, Oklahoma line. In fact, my hometown is Coffeyville, Kansas but we lived just over the Oklahoma border on a little ranch, about eight miles outside of town. The landscape was just as you probably imagine it. Mostly prairie, with quite a lot of white field rock. Not a lot of great farm land but real good for cattle.

There are a lot of muddy, man-made ponds that you will see cattle standing in, trying to cool off in the hot summer. And there is the Verdigris River that flows through. It's a sick looking green. The word verdigris actually describes the bright bluish-green stuff that forms on copper because of oxidation. So, that is what the Verdigris River looks like. It was certainly not cool, clean water. Sometimes the river floods and you can imagine how gross that is.

On our land there was a creek – Snow Creek – that ran along sometimes fairly swiftly. At times it was clean enough that we would swim in it. It had a rock bottom so it was easy wading in it. It wasn't very clean most of the time either, however.

But, often times, my granddad would ask my brother, David and me, if we wanted to go with him to get spring water. We were always anxious to go, not so much for the water, but because it was Sunday afternoon and granddad would usually “get lost” and somehow always end up at the park in the next town, where there was a train, a zoo and a merry-go-round.

But the spring water was kind of amazing. I never saw a place where it was gushing up, like Jesus describes the water he will give. This spring water came running out of a pipe that someone had put in. Sometimes it ran really fast and sometimes it was a trickle. But the spring never dried up. The water always ran out of the pipe.

And unlike the green river water or the muddy ponds or the dirty creek water, the spring water was clear and clean and refreshing to drink. Granddad would fill up several gallon jars of water to take home so we could all enjoy that good water.

I remembered the spring water and the trips with my granddad as I was studying this week – looking again at the Israelites wandering in the wilderness – thirsty and afraid that they will die without good water.

And then thinking about Jesus – tired, hot and thirsty, sitting down by the well to rest while the disciples go off to find some food. And the woman who comes to draw water. She's interesting, isn't she? This is Samaria – a place where most Jews avoid because of cultural differences from way back and religious differences as well. The Samaritans were Jews who had, during one of the exiles, intermarried with their captors, which made them “mixed blood.” And the pure Jews found that not acceptable.

So, she had that against her. But it seems that she also had other issues. She had been married, we discover, five different times and the man she is with now is not her husband. In that day, that was a terrible social taboo.

Which is probably why she comes to the well at noon. Think about it. Surely the village women would come together, so they could chat and have a little social time. But they would also come to the well early in the morning when it was cool, or in the evening when the sun was not so hot.

But this woman comes at noon – the hottest time of the day. And she is alone. She is not there with a friend to chat with. I find that really sad. To be an outcast in your own village among your own people. We have no idea what her situation was – why she had been married so many times or why now she was not married. Maybe she wanted to be but the man would not marry her.

So, it is an amazing thing for her to hear this Jewish man speak to her at all. He was just sitting there, almost like he was waiting for her. And he just asks her for a drink, which starts the conversation. He ends up telling her if she knew who he was she would be asking him for a drink because it would be water that would cause her to never be thirsty again.

You can almost see the wheels spinning in her head. Never be thirsty again? I would never have to come here to this well and draw water, all alone, probably being laughed at as I walk through the village. I could go for that water!

Jesus tells her the water he gives is Living Water – like water that gushes out of a spring – it's never ending. It never runs out. It's always good. It satisfies the thirst like nothing else can do. This is water straight from God.

Like the water given by God to the Israelites. God said to Moses to take his staff and strike the rock and when he did, water came gushing out of it and the people's thirst was quenched. In spite of their testing God and their quarreling with Moses, their constant complaining, their stiff-necked ungrateful behavior, God provided water for them so that they would live.

And the woman at the well ... she didn't even know how thirsty she really was. Not until Jesus offered her water that was a real quencher of thirst did she come to long for it.

And the more she talked to Jesus, this man who – even though he could see right into her life and knew everything about her – still treated her with respect and care. He – a man, a Jew – actually took the time to talk to her – a Samaritan and a woman. He showed her grace.

And really, isn't that what Living Water really is? Pure grace.

What do you thirst for? There are so many things we humans are thirsty for, aren't there? We thirst for money, power, fame, love, entertainment, sex, a perfect body, more education, to be better than we are, to be better looking than we are, to climb the proverbial ladder, to have more stuff, to do more stuff ... the list goes on and on.

And like the Israelites, even when God provides, we often forget to thank him. In fact, we sometimes forget that God even is the provider. We often get the notion that because of our hard work or our great skills we are the ones who provided the good things we enjoy.

Remember that joke I told you last week that Carrie shared with me? What is the difference between God and me? God never thinks he is me!

But, even if we don't consciously say to ourselves "I am God" we sometimes act like we think we are.

Think about the thirst we have – the things we humans think we are dying of thirst for – and it started way back in the beginning of creation when Adam and Eve gave in to the temptation to have the same knowledge as God had.

And all that thirst led to what God says is sin. Because sin is when we put ourselves in God's place. Sin is when we turn our eyes away from our Creator and we stop trusting him and we just do our own thing. Sin is about turning away from God.

We humans are so prone to sin. We run after all those human longings with a passion, trying to satisfy the thirst, not always realizing that the thirst we have is for the Living Water. The thirst we really deeply long for is for God. Is for the One he sent to us – the one who is the spring of Living Water – the one who gives us grace. We really long for grace.

But what is grace? Grace is that sweet release from the sin that has us so bound up that we run like chickens with their heads cut off trying to chase the next big thing we're thirsty for – or we think we are.

Grace is that amazing forgiveness when we really don't deserve it. If we stop and look at our lives, we know we are sinful, ungrateful people. We know we don't deserve forgiveness and we certainly can't do anything that is going to earn that grace. Grace is a free gift of love.

God listened to the ungrateful complaining of the Israelites and in spite of their sinful behavior, God had mercy. God had compassion. God provided grace by providing water.

There was another time in the Bible when we read of Jesus being thirsty. He was actually on his way to that time and place when he stopped at the well and offered Living Water to the Samaritan woman and ultimately to many people in the village that day. The people in that Samaritan village had their thirst quenched as they received grace from Jesus – and their lives were changed forever.

Jesus, the Son of God – the Living Water – was nailed to a cross. It was approaching noon, the same time as when he met the woman at the well that hot day when he was tired and thirsty. But, even in his weariness, he gave of himself so that others could have life, could have grace. He has been severely beaten. He is in pain – a pain that none of us will ever know, at least I pray we don't. He has nails in his hands and feet. He is bleeding. His head is bleeding because they have pushed down a crown they made of thorns that they put on his head. They have mocked him and spit on him and treated him worse than a common criminal.

And Jesus said, "I thirst." And no one – no one offered him Living Water. No one offered him clear, fresh spring water. No. They offered him sour wine. And after they had given it to him, he died.

The one who is the Living Water – the only one who can really quench the deep, deep thirst that we have – the thirst that is a longing to come home to God – that one was thirsty. He gave himself that we might have life. Living Water. Grace, that is forgiveness of sin and everlasting life with God, our Creator. The one who was dying and thirsty poured out himself – filling up our cups with life and love and grace.

Jesus offers that Living Water to all who will just reach out and accept it. He gave everything – his life, his breath, his all so that he could quench our thirst for God once and for all. There is nothing to do but receive it. But when we do, we should also grow stronger and love God deeper and learn to live a life that is thankful and that is passionate about being a channel – a spring – where that Living Water flows so that others can come and fill up their cups and their jars with Spring Water – cool, clear, fresh cups of grace – Living Water.

I love this picture Jim found for today. Look at it. It is a spring of water gushing up from the ground. But look how desolate the surroundings are. At least the immediate surroundings. It looks dry – like a desert. Yet here is a spring of fresh water right in the middle of that dry land, gushing up.

That is how Jesus' Living Water is for us. We may not always realize until we are in a very dry place, but sometimes, spiritually, we are dry, dying for a cool, clean long drink of Living Water. There is nothing like it when we are so dry we are cracking up inside. Like dry, dry ground we are becoming like dust. But Jesus offers us everlasting Living Water – grace – that satisfies our longing – our home with God who made us and loves us.

Are you thirsty? Do you know what you're thirsting for? If you have not drank from the cup Jesus offers – the Living Water – then consider receiving it today. It is water that will quench your thirst forever. Into eternity. And if you have already drank that water, then think about how you can help offer that cup to others. There are so many people who are dying of thirst. Be someone who leads them to the Living Waters Jesus gives. Amen.