

John 4:5-42

Exodus 17:1-7

"Water, Water, Everywhere"

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On June 27, 1880 in a small town out in the middle of nowhere called Tuscumbia, Alabama, a woman named Kate Adams and her husband, Arthur Keller, celebrated the birth of their first child, a baby girl. They named her Helen, and for the first year and a half of her life, she was a normal and healthy baby. However, at nineteen months of age, baby Helen contracted a serious infection that left her both blind and deaf. Suddenly all hopes of raising a normal family vanished for Arthur and Kate, and they struggled with how to raise a child who was now permanently without sight or hearing. After Helen recovered and time went by, it became apparent that she only retained one word out of the few she had learned as a baby, and that was *water*, which she asked for routinely by saying, "wa-wa". Other than that, she was completely blind, deaf, and mute. At that time there were schools for the deaf as well as schools for the blind in the United States, but they were far away, and they were not equipped to take in someone who was both blind and deaf. So, Helen spent the first several years of her

life in a hopeless state, barely able to communicate. She was in danger of growing up severely disabled and isolated, a shunned nobody crippled by her sensory deficiency.

Her parents, Arthur and Kate, grieved over the condition of their daughter, and they became disheartened about her future. It seemed extremely unlikely that anyone would come to such an out-of-the-way place like Tuscumbia to teach a child who was both deaf and blind. The family's fortune turned, however, in 1887, when Helen was seven years old. A woman named Anne Sullivan, who was a teacher who had taught deaf children previously, agreed to come to Tuscumbia to try to teach Helen. It was the beginning of a marvelous relationship, and through Sullivan's persistence, patience, and love, Helen Keller grew up to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree and become a world-renowned author, activist, and lecturer.

In her autobiography, Helen Keller wrote about the significance of Anne Sullivan's teaching, and she recounts the day that Ms. Sullivan showed up in Tuscumbia to begin her education. "I felt approaching footsteps," she wrote. "I stretched out my hand... Someone took it, and I was caught up and held close in the arms of her who would come to reveal all things to me, and, more

than all things else, to love me." Through her love and patience Ms. Sullivan began trying to teach Helen that everything had a name. This was something that Helen had never learned, and being blind and deaf there was no real way for her to connect words with the objects she felt in the world. Helen resisted her teaching, and nothing Ms. Sullivan tried worked. Helen would frequently get frustrated and throw violent tantrums in protest. But one day Ms. Sullivan had an idea, and she took Helen down to the well-house. Again, Helen Keller wrote of that day, "We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other hand the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten--a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! It would have been difficult to find a happier child that

day than I was as I lay in my bed. . . For the first time, I longed for a new day."¹ In that moment, through the cool stream of water washing over her, Helen Keller was reborn. She was given joy; she was given hope, and she was given newness of life.

Helen Keller's story is one that fits well into Christian discourse because it has remarkable parallels to the significance of water as a symbol in our history and in our worship together. Water and Christianity go way back, and it's not a stretch at all to say that the symbol of water is present from the very first pages of scripture to the very last. The imagery of water appears both in the first and last chapters of the Bible. Our relationship with God is so very often symbolized by water, and if we were to make a list of all the times, either in the stories of the Bible or in our own lives, that something significant happened through water, we would be here for a while. The beginning of God's story reads, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Here, water is something sinister and unknown. It is a part of the formless deep

¹ Helen Keller, *The Story of my Life*.

chaos that exists before God creates anything "good". But as God creates, water becomes less of a curse and more of a blessing. God says, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures," and they do. What was the seat of chaos becomes the foundation for life. And this is a pattern that continues throughout scripture. Water, which is in essence mysterious and even dangerous, becomes the symbol through which God's blessing is delivered. In our Old Testament reading for today, we see an example of that. Even as the people of Israel grumble, and complain, and sin against God, God provides and cares for the people by blessing them with water from a rock.

In our New Testament reading as well, we meet a Samaritan woman who is drawing water from a well in the middle of the day. She lives in a small village, out in the middle of nowhere, and the possibility of anyone coming to that well in the heat of the day is remote. But then this stranger named Jesus comes by. He comes up to the well, next to the woman, and suddenly we have a very interesting situation on our hands.

This woman is, of course, a Samaritan, and for centuries there had been a deep-seated enmity between the Jews and the

Samaritans. Jews and Samaritans hated each other and openly expressed their racial and religious conflict with each other. So here we have Jesus, a Jew, standing at a well with a Samaritan woman. And the fact that she's a woman is significant - the laws of the day were clear that males, particularly religious ones, were not to have anything to do with women, other than their wives, in public. The conventional norms of the day would certainly tell Jesus to get out of there - and fast - to avoid a confrontation.

It's obvious that Jesus has no business going anywhere near this woman, but instead of turning around and high-tailing it back to Judah, he does a remarkable and astonishing thing: he asks her for water. She objects, of course. "You know better than that. You're not supposed to have anything to do with me," He replies, "If you knew who I was you would give me a drink and in turn I would give you 'living water.'" And we can sense the woman wondering, who is this man? Who is this, that comes to her out in the middle of nowhere, bringing no bucket to the well and yet offering to give her living water? Besides all that, he seems to know about her dark side, the skeletons in her closet that she'd rather not talk about. "You had five husbands," he says, "and you're living with a man

now who is not your husband." This woman might not be deaf or blind, but there is something incredibly hopeless about her. She's a Samaritan and a woman and a sinner. She is coming to the well in the heat of day instead of the cooler evening hours when women ordinarily visit the well. It's obvious that she's an outcast, a nobody, even among her own people.

But here, perhaps for the first time in her life, is a man who has simply come to her out in the middle of nowhere, a man who sees that she's a Samaritan and knows that she's an unrepentant sinner and comes to her anyway. He talks to her. He accepts her for who she is. It was undoubtedly the most shocking experience of her life, so astonishing in fact that she drops her water jar and runs back to the village to tell anyone who will listen about this amazing stranger named Jesus. The irony of this encounter is that even though she left her water jar at the well, the one that would carry actual water, she leaves that place carrying the first drops of "living water" inside her. Jesus uses that term, "living water", as a symbol of the love and hope, joy and newness of life that comes from knowing first-hand God's incredible love for the world, and for you. It's been said that the Samaritan woman leaves that well as the very

embodiment of John 3:16-17, which read, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." If there ever was someone who deserved legitimate, justifiable condemnation, it was this Samaritan woman. She was as guilty as she could be. She was an unrepentant sinner. She deserved to be condemned. Instead, Jesus gave her a blessing. You might call it "living water" as he did, but what it was was hope, and acceptance, and love, despite her sinfulness. And you know, Jesus comes to us in the same way, right where we are, with the same blessing. He comes to us with salvation instead of condemnation, acceptance rather than punishment, and redemption rather than judgment. And he does it right in the midst of our very own sinfulness.

That, in a nutshell, is what water symbolizes for us. Every time we baptize a child in the church, we proclaim that God has called and claimed that child despite his or her future sins or shortcomings. At some point in your life, someone put some water on your head, or sprinkled you, or dunked you all the way under,

and announced that you belonged to God no matter what. In the danger and mystery and blessing of that water, your new life began.

During this season of Lent, when we are called to be more aware of our sinfulness and our shortcomings, we come to this text as thirsty people. We need this text, and we need the well and the water. We need Jesus to come to us out in the middle of our nowheres, sitting beside us and telling us everything we have ever done. We might resist at first, wondering why in the world this man has come to *us*, but then something happens. We realize that this Jesus has come to give us hope and joy, love and newness of life. We feel the cool stream of water wash over us, and suddenly *we know who he is*. This is Jesus, our God who comes to us in the middle of nowhere, the living word. In that astonishing moment, to borrow the words of Helen Keller, we are caught up in the arms of the one who reveals all things to us, and more than all things else, comes to love us. The living word awakens our soul, gives it light, hope, joy, and sets it free.

And then, for the first time, even in the midst of our hopelessness and our sinfulness, we may long for a new day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.