



The Woman at the Well by Bernardo Strozzi

In the Old Testament lesson this morning, water from the rock provides physical renewal and the sustainment of earthly life. But in order to truly achieve Spiritual renewal, there is some reconciliation that needs to take place. That's the really big New-Testament word that Paul talks about in the *Epistle to the Romans*, this "reconciliation" between man and God, between us and those around us, and sometimes reconciliation is needed between ourselves as we are, and the people we long to be but cannot. And you may think, "But I don't need to be reconciled with God. We get along just fine." But is that true? Have you reached a place where you are completely at home with the presence of The Lord in your life as a constant companion? Are you walking in

perfect accord with him? Are you really walking humbly with your God all the moments of your waking days, because I know that I certainly am not. Yes indeed, "Prone to wander Lord I feel it."

The Israelites are so very rebellious. Here they are in the Sinai, griping yet again about their plight. Why ever would God have **them** for his children? Wouldn't a much better choice have been someone like you and me? I mean, wouldn't we be much more grateful about these blessings, much more willing to accept the painful truth that, yes we are truly blessed by God in new ways every morning, even though we don't really deserve such blessing? I mean, wouldn't you and I be much more willing to adopt an attitude of true repentance and amendment of life? Because, surely we have the ability to look our short-comings squarely in the face, and then actually take the bull by the horns and really get down to doing something about making the necessary changes in direction our lives are taking, so that we can truly be a people who live, and move, and have their being in Christ Jesus. Right?

Well, let's do a little experiment to see just how willing we are to confront our shortcomings. If you listened to the Psalm for today, it may well have seemed to you that these words were familiar. Do me a favor; would you Please pick up that rather "blah" looking *Book of Common Prayer* in that drab burgundy color there at your seat, and turn to its version of the Psalm we just heard, Psalm 95. It starts at the bottom of page 724...Now, you'll see that the Psalm is composed of a few themes. The first two verses are invitations to praise God, inviting the Congregation to sing to the Lord, shout his praise, and come to him with thanksgiving. Verses 3-5 extol the greatness of The Lord as the supreme King and Creator Lord.

Going on to the top of page 725, verses 6 and 7 establish our relationship to God; how he is our Sovereign Lord and we the sheep of his flock. And then, the final portion of the Psalm, verse 8 through 11 – perhaps the most important message in this poetry – is a warning, a caution not to behave as the Israelites had done in the passage from Exodus we heard earlier. These final four verses are really a caution at what will be our fate if we forget to honor and glorify God, as explained in the previous stanzas of the poetry.

So, here's this wonderful, complete prayer of praise to God which is, first an invitation to praise Him, then a description of his glory, followed by the definition of our relationship to Our God as his people, and finally there is the caution, the warning of what fate awaits those who are not faithful to Our Lord. These four themes, invitation, glorification, relationship, and warning – these four themes are comprised in this morning's Psalter.

Now, for some of you, there was probably a strange familiarity when you heard the opening words of Psalm 95, "Come let us sing unto the Lord." Because this Psalm is recited at just about every Episcopal service of Morning Prayer. In fact, would you turn to page 82 in your *Prayer-Book*...Sure enough, right there in the middle of page 82, there it is – Psalm 95. And we have our themes again, right? There are the first two verses of invitation to praise God, followed by the three verses that extol God's greatness.

Then there are the verses that establish the relationship with Our God as his people as the sheep of his pasture, and finally...and finally...Wait! Why, there's no cautionary theme here, is there? There is nothing about what will happen if we succumb to our shortcomings, and forget to be faithful to Our Lord. Why, it's as though someone has eliminated the reminder of how fallen we can be as human beings.

Now, why'd they do that? Surely this omission isn't due to the fact that we would rather not dwell on our shortcomings, or admit our need for correction and amendment of life? Why, this omission from our worship must be just an oversight, right?... Well, to quote Anthony from "Designing Women, "I don't think so, Mary Jo."

The truth is, almost before the ink was dry on the first edition of the *Prayer Book*, our denomination were struggling to get those cautionary notes that remind us of the need for repentance excised from our worship. Almost from the very beginning of the Anglican faith, we wanted to shut that unhappy warning out of our Sunday worship. And sometime in the 19th century in the American *Prayer Book*, we succeeded. By 1928 it had permanently dis-apperated (as Harry Potter fans would say). Because we would rather just not go to that uncomfortable place. It's true, it seems; you don't have to go swimming in Egypt to be in denial.

The Gospel for this morning is the most arresting illustration in Scripture as to how dreadfully powerful is this spirit of denial in all of us. Because the woman at the well really does speak for us all. We see in this passage the classic stages of denial that we need to work through if we are truly to come face to face with God. These stages are: 1-Dismissal; 2-Defiance; 3-Demands; 4-Diversion; 5-Deliverance. Let's look at them.

(Dismissal): First the woman is really rather dismissive – "What do you mean, by talking to me. I'm a Samaritan and you are a Jew," she says. (See Jn.4:9) In our walk to the Cross there is always a period of time during which we dismiss the need for God in our lives. We don't have time for all that nonsense. No time to pray. No time to read the Bible. No time to go to Church. So often our first reaction to God is dismissal.

(Defiance): The next thing this Samaritan woman says is, "Are you bigger, more powerful than our forefather Jacob who gave us this well?" (See Jn.4:12) "Just who do you think you are, Jesus? Just who do you think you are, telling me I need to make you Lord of my life?" When I was a child, in our housing development, we used to play 'King of the mountain.' "Just who do you think you are, God? Why, I'm King of the mountain, thank you very much." Yes, after dismissing God, when things don't go our way, and God comes tapping on our hearts, our reaction is often defiance.

(Demands): After dismissal and defiance comes the "demands" stage The woman decides to negotiate with Jesus. And as with all negotiations, she has some demands to make. OK she'll maybe swallow what this strange man is peddling, but she wants things on her own terms. "OK. Give me this living water. That way, I won't have to come to this stupid well and draw water every blessed morning."(See Jn.4:15) But Jesus isn't having any of it. What He has to give is something much more precious than simply eliminating a few house-hold chores for this lost woman. But she wants things on her own terms, on terms and in a world that she can understand and is familiar with.

This, then is the "demands" stage of our faith walk. Often, we think, we can actually bargain with God, don't we? We think, if we're just clever enough, we can have God's love on our own, fallen, easy, comfortable terms. So, we try to outsmart God. But there's a problem. Because, you see, God invented smart. And the only one way you're going to get what God has to give, is on his terms."

(Diversion): Now, what happens next, after this poor woman has tried dismissing God, and defying God, and presenting demands to God, what happens next in John 4 is really funny. The woman figures out that she can't outsmart Jesus, so she tries a diversionary tactic. And, as usually happens most of the time we try to divert attention away from our shortcomings, we try to mix in a little flattery, right? "Oh sir, what a powerful profit you are... since you know about the 5 different men I've slept with." (See Jn.4:19)

When I was in graduate school, studying for my MBA, I discovered that if you hadn't done your homework for a particular class, the best thing to do would be to ask your professor questions about something you knew he or she was interested in. And the very best diversionary tactic was to ask the professor about an article or book your teacher had written, and throw in a few compliments about how interesting it was. So, try a little diversionary flattery, right? And we try that with God too, from time to time, sort of just pretending to be devoted to him.

But He knows when we're insincere. Jesus, who could see into the hearts of men, certainly knew what was going on at that well, and he wasn't having any of it. He finally insists that the woman at the well see him for who He really is, the Christ, the promised Messiah, God incarnate, The Lord. (See Jn.4:26) He requires that clarity of vision from us all.

That's the way it is with God, you see. He's not going to be diverted. God's not going to stop until we see him, and confess him, and proclaim Him, and honor Him for what and who He really is: The Father in Heaven. The sovereign Lord of all Creation. And until you come to that place of making Him the Lord of your life, believe me, pretending to be faithful will get you nowhere. So, worship Him in Spirit and in truth, and heartfelt sincerity, if you would truly have Him as your Lord.

(Deliverance): Finally, did you notice what happened at the end of the account? Because *something* has indeed happened. This woman, who has lead such a lost life, goes back to town. And she's been changed. She's run out of options, and she's run up against the immutable truth and power of the Word of God. And she goes back to town shouting, "Come and see, come and see this strange and wonderful man who knows everything there is to know." And something about her has changed. Something in this woman has profoundly changed. Because we are told that not only did the townspeople come out of the city to meet this marvelous being who could transform someone just by His very presence. We are also told that they asked Jesus, they begged Him to stay with them for a while, so that they could change too. (See Jn.4:39-42)

You see, when you've tried dismissing Him, and defying Him, and bargaining with him, and diverting his attention by just pretending to be his, when you've used up all your excuses, and find yourself defenseless before the Lord of love, that my friends is when you too can invite Him in to stay with you for a while. That is when the blessed deliverance of salvation can take place, and we can become Children of the Living God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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