

Jesus was tired out at the beginning of today's Gospel reading. Can you relate to feeling tired out? I know I can, especially after this week where it feels like things are changing around me very quickly and I hardly have time to adjust to one change before another is announced. In efforts to reduce the rate of infection of the COVID-19 virus events are being canceled, adjustments need to be made to those events that are not being cancelled, and it feels like I am always waiting for decisions from those in leadership over me, so I can figure out how to respond. But what is making me tired was probably not the same cause for fatigue in Jesus in today's Gospel where we read he was tired from his journey. Remember we are in John's Gospel and we have to be careful about taking words at face value. While the author of John's Gospel might mean Jesus was physically tired from walking for a long time, the author might also mean Jesus was tired from all the work he had done in his ministry thus far.

For those of us who feel tired, Jesus shows us a way to find renewal when we need it: he went back to the well. Not just any well, one with historical and theological and biblical significance. The term "going back to the well" means to return to the source of something of value. In Jesus' case it is a well that is connected to the Old Testament, a well that still exists today with a church now built up around it and an old Orthodox priest who has lived in that church for many years in order to keep it open so that the well is accessible to the people of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths; who all share the connection of a common faith ancestor to that particular well. We all go back to Jacob.

In Jesus' day the well wasn't so grand and hospitable, but it still seemed to have been a place for him to find connection, rest, reflection, or peace, because he chose to stay there while his disciples ventured into town to purchase supplies. We also heard in this morning's Gospel while Jesus was resting a woman came to the same well at noon.

There is no shortage of words about this woman at the well. Scholars and commentators have seemingly savored imagining all kinds of things about her but all the author of John's Gospel tells us is that she was a Samaritan woman who had five husbands and now lives with a man. And apparently, she was quite a conversationalist, able to converse with Jesus about all manner of subjects from religion to history to the racism between Jews and Samaritans.

But there is more going on here beneath the surface that we need to understand, and it goes back to the source, back to the part of the Bible we call the Old

Testament. Well stories are a standard Biblical trope and they follow a predictable pattern. Remember, unlike today's modern readers who are always looking for a new and clever plotline, the predictable patterns of certain Bible stories were ways for people who heard the stories to help identify the kind of encounter that was happening and what that encounter pointed to.

Well stories were how long-term relationships formed, especially marriages. Usually the story goes like this: a man and a woman meet at a well, the man has usually been traveling and is tired, the woman has a family connection to the well. The man asks for a drink, the woman obliges, and a conversation ensues. The woman goes back to her family and tells them about the man at the well, she then returns to the well to invite the man back to her family, and long story short, the two who met at the well usually end up married. That's how it worked for couples like Moses and Zipporah, Isaac and Rebecca (even though it wasn't Isaac himself who went to the well) and Jacob and Rachel. In fact, when Jacob met Rachel at the well, the meeting didn't take place in the cool of the evening or morning, it happened at noon. The same time Jesus met the woman at the well of Jacob in today's Gospel.

It is quite possible the author of John's Gospel is trying to tell us something deeper is happening in this meeting at Jacob's well, something symbolic. That God in Christ has gone back to the well in order to reconnect with the Samaritans. Or perhaps it is another way to talk about how Jesus came to reconnect with humanity by going back to a story we might be familiar with and changing it up slightly so that the end result isn't marriage, but belief, and a renewed sense of the Presence of God in our midst and the beginning of a new type of relationship or covenant between God and all God's People.

That might be what the woman showing up at noon could indicate. Although there are plenty of scholars and commentators who would disagree. There are those who believe the time of day she showed up indicates the woman at the well was a woman of ill repute, because women didn't go out to get water at the hottest part of the day, they went when the temperature was cooler. Historians tell us water gathering was the work of women and the well wasn't just a place for work; it was a place for women of the community to connect and catch up on gossip and news. That is why some scholars and commentators see a woman coming at a different time of day was a person forced to practice social distancing because she was an outcaste in her own community. To justify their judgment, those scholars and commentators point out her multiple husbands and unconventional (for the time) lifestyle.

But we need to be careful about such negativity and condemnation of this character, because not all scholars from church history have judged this woman so harshly. Early Church fathers like St. John Chrysostom saw in the woman an ability to

learn, and through her conversation with Jesus grew from naïve bystander to an intelligent leader and evangelist who brought her entire community to faith in Christ, which is no small act. It wasn't until the reformation when scholars focused on the story of the redeemed sinner that the woman was seen through their eyes as a belligerent, rude sinner of Christ's redeeming.

Perhaps with so many layers of interpretation placed on this woman and her conversation with Jesus it is best if we go back to the well, so to speak, go back to the text itself where we might notice how Jesus himself responded to the woman. He didn't use the word sin anywhere in his conversation with her. He didn't tell her to change her ways. Instead, he seems to have found a way through their shared conversation to connect with her and she with him. Unlike the pharisee Nicodemus who met with Jesus earlier in John's Gospel in the darkness of night who struggled to understand Jesus, this woman who is not named and has no title who met Jesus in broad daylight is able to not only understand him, she is able to keep up with him. It is to this woman – the first person in John's Gospel- that Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah and she is the first person – even before Jesus' disciples- to believe him. Those conversations at the well can be powerful!

So powerful, it seems, that it wasn't enough for this woman alone to understand and believe; she went back to her community, leaving her water jar behind her, in order to bring that community back to the well, to Jesus. It was the community who invited Jesus to stay with them a while and during what must have been other powerful conversations more people reconnected with God through Jesus.

Today's Gospel reveals a truly a remarkable conversation. One where it seems everyone received refreshment and renewal. The woman, Jesus, and a whole community. Perhaps, in some way, what Jesus was waiting for at the well wasn't just a chance to rest his tired feet and muscles. Perhaps he was waiting for the woman who was willing to talk with him, who was able to listen to him, and was courageous enough to leave behind her water jar and go and invite others to see who she had found at the well.

And let's not overlook the importance of that abandoned water jar. It is not some idle detail. Maybe she picked up after she brought her community to meet Jesus at the well. Or not. Perhaps it points to the life of the woman who left her water jar like those disciples who left their nets and their father to follow Jesus as she was now part of that living water of Christ and once you taste that water, there is no going back, unless it's going back to Christ. Maybe this woman represents what it means to follow Jesus.

Those are important reminders for us today, that when we feel tired or frightened for whatever reason, we can always go back to the well, back to the life-giving stories and connection with Christ through conversations and rituals we find there. Whether this means for you reading scriptures, prayer, attending worship services, talking with people however you can. Yesterday I met via video conference with colleagues in campus ministry in the diocese and even though we are all still dealing with our feelings of anger, sorrow, disappointment, loss as we learn how our neighborhoods are going to change as campuses are effectively shut down, and how that change impacts us, our relationships, and ministry, it was good to see one another and be reminded we aren't alone. We didn't have solutions or plans, and we weren't ready for those things yet, we were all too tired, but we were all together and we remembered we can go back to what we value: our faith and each other. We left that meeting feeling a little less tired and a little more renewed to continue our work in this uniquely challenging time, even as we are trying to figure out what water jars we are going to have leave behind – things like our egos, worship style preferences, events we look forward to, the way things have always been done – in order to follow Jesus into the changes we are experiencing so we can be present to the present needs.

For us here at Church of the Good Shepherd, as we gather at our well this morning and go back out into the world and a new week, perhaps the same lesson will help us: we are not alone, we have each other and we have Christ, present through the Holy Spirit, that isn't changing. We can remember how deeply we are all connected, and how important it is to do what is best to care for those connections; to not judge harshly or condemn those who choose to distance themselves socially, to figure out ways to stay connected and to continue to serve our neighbors, even those neighbors who will not be present physically but I am sure will be in other ways. And as we learn more, make more changes, adaptations and plans of action, we can consider what water jars we need to leave and what we need to take up as we follow Jesus into a rapidly changing world.