

John 4:5-42
Feb 24, 2008

South Plains
3rd Lent

Quarreling With God

One of my favorite comic strips in the Sunday *Daily Progress* is "The Lockhorns," a middle-aged couple constantly arguing about one thing or another. The humor arises out of the multitude of misunderstandings and outright conflicts that inevitably happen when people live in close proximity. Quarrels are not only funny, they are often unpleasant and disturbing. When we have a quarrel with the Lord, the God in whom we live and move and have our being, the argument can leave our stomach in knots and our heart in confusion. Today's two readings, however, suggest that quarreling with Jesus can have two very different outcomes, either heartbreak or healing.

In the Exodus reading, the Israelites break God's heart as they travel through the wilderness. The wilderness is a dry wasteland. When they make camp, there's no water. They are called the children of Israel because they immediately begin quarreling with Moses who points out that their complaints are testing God's patience, the patience of the very God who has just liberated them from slavery. Their reply to that warning is to intensify the whining, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" God eventually provides water, but the quarrel irks the Lord and it irks Moses. Moses calls the place

Merribah and Massah, Hebrew for "quarrel" and "test." The names become legendary for Israel's unfaithfulness so that the psalmist, centuries later, warns worshipers, "Do not harden your hearts, as at Merribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me... though they had seen my work (Psalm 95:8)."

In that instance, quarreling left a bad taste in God's mouth that lasted for a long time. On the other hand, the quarrel between Jesus and the Samaritan woman has a much happier outcome, producing a moment of healing. This story tells me that quarreling with God can strengthen our faith, if we can learn to do it right, because it can clear the air, resolving roadblocks in our journey of faith, roadblocks that prevent us from a closer relationship with Christ.

Of course, there are risks when we tangle with the Creator of heaven and earth. But, I suspect God would rather hear our honest disagreement with scripture, our anger at his ways, our skepticism about his church, than to hear syrupy prayers that avoid what's really on our minds. What's even worse is a life that contradicts a hypocritical confession of faith. So I've tried to come up with four things in the bulletin insert to remember when quarreling with God.

In this story, Jesus comes very close to picking a fight with the Samaritan woman. He knows he is in Samaria where speaking to the locals could get a Jew into trouble. Anywhere in the Middle East could get a

man in trouble if he initiates a conversation with an unaccompanied woman. But, Jesus goes ahead anyway. He wants to engage this person, whose faith is different from his own; he wants a serious conversation about religion, perhaps even an argument.

The testimony of scripture is that God likes a good debate. Moses does not hesitate to argue with the Lord about the Lord's obligation to protect those ex-slaves; and Moses is called the friend of God. In the famous words from Isaiah where the King James says, "Come, let us reason together," most modern translators render that verse as a debate: "Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord (Isa. 1:18)." And, the book of Job begins with an argument between God and Satan, and ends with an argument between Job and God. We do not worship a God who backs away from quarrels, or who punishes people who disagree with the purposes of God.

Maybe that is what attracts Jesus to this feisty woman at the well. She has come to the well, not in the morning when other women would be found drawing water for the day's washing and cooking. She comes in the middle of the day when she will miss the exchange of news that makes a group into a community. He baits her with his request for a drink. She questions his judgment. He pushes back by telling her that if she only knew what she was doing, she would ask him for water. She rises then to the occasion with a rhetorical question that is civil, but sharp, "Are you greater than Jacob?"

In asking that question, her quarrel takes her closer to the truth than she guesses, because Jesus is indeed greater than Jacob. While she thinks that she has forced him into a corner, she has actually taken the first step toward faith: she has opened the subject of Jesus' greatness. He ignores the question of who is greater. Instead he makes the bold and great claim to have the water of eternal life.

And, at this point in the discussion, the initiative is shifting. She asks for the water that will keep from ever being thirsty again. Now she is asking Jesus for something. Thirst is a strong motivator. No matter how much water we have or think we have, we need it every day. The State of Georgia wants water from the Tennessee River. Exploration of outer space starts with the search for water.

What are we thirsty for? What will water our spirits when they get parched by work that fails to satisfy us? What will cool minds and bodies at the end of the day when they are overheated by quarrels and wars that drain our energy? What will keep the community well full and flowing so that we can gather for conversations that bind us together?

Jesus is offering this woman water that gives life, life abundant and full. She doesn't know exactly what that means, but she's interested. So, Jesus seems to change the subject. "Go call your husband and come back," he says. Can't do it. "You have had five

husbands. And, the one you have now is not your husband.” The woman is caught off guard. I think she’s still defensive, but she’s moving closer to the truth when she replies, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.”

She has moved from wanting some kind of special water that only this stranger can provide to recognizing part of the truth about the stranger himself. He is a prophet. OK. Here’s a test for the prophet. Jews worship in Jerusalem, and Samaritans worship on Mount Gerizim. Who is right, stranger? If Jesus can resolve this bitter ethnic conflict, perhaps he is indeed a prophet.

At this point, Jesus takes their quarrel to a different level. He offers a solution that Samaritans and Jews alike could accept: At the end of time, the only thing that will matter is that we worship in spirit and truth. How many times have you and I resolved a potential argument with Baptists or Lutherans or Catholics or whoever by saying, “We’ll answer that question when we get to heaven.” If Jesus had left the conversation there, he and the woman could have parted, if not friends, at least as non-combatants.

But, Jesus needs more than a friend. He comes clean and says that he is the Messiah, the one coming at the end of time. He is the end toward which history is moving. He has the water of life because he stands at the headwaters of the river of life. He is the goal toward which every river is running. His presence means that

the future has collapsed into this moment. The hour has come and now is present.

The woman leaves her water jar empty at the well and runs back into the village to tell her neighbors what she has seen and heard. If we want to know how evangelism works, we have a model in the Samaritan woman. She’s not a likely evangelist: a female with an unhappy past, an unconventional past. She’s not an educated evangelist. She knows very little about Jesus himself and nothing she could articulate in a statement of faith. She’s not altogether credible, even among Samaritans. One could argue that she is not yet fully convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. All she knows is that he told her “everything” she’d ever done. Even that is an exaggeration.

But, something has happened to change her attitude toward this stranger. She now hopes for more out of her life than just the routine of drawing a jar of water from the well. She hopes for a real life. She will risk taking a larger part in the community life of her own village in order to tell others what’s happening to her. She’s beginning to blossom.

This conversation is long. We’d be hard pressed to find a longer conversation that Jesus has with anyone in scripture. There’s a reason for that. Neither one gives up. Jesus doesn’t get huffy and tell her she can’t talk to him that way. The woman doesn’t go away sorrowful like

the rich, young ruler. She will not give up until her thirst has been satisfied.

All her questions have not been answered, and she surely will not claim to answer all the questions that her neighbors will raise. But, she invites them to meet Jesus with the same words of invitation Phillip used when he told Nathaniel about the Lamb of God in chapter: "Come and see," they say. That's her evangelistic outreach, the invitation to come and see for yourself.

Come and ask questions. Come and argue. Come and challenge. What better place to quarrel with the Lord than here, where he promises to be with us?