

## Lent 3 – Thirst and Living Water

(Exodus 17:1–7; Romans 5:1–11; John 4:5–42)

A woman I worked with once told this story as part of our morning devotion at school. She was reflecting on wilderness and thirst and she spoke about a drive she took years ago, somewhere out past Port Augusta. She had only lived in Australia about a year and she just wanted to take a few days off on her own. And she wanted to see the outback. SO....

She packed the car, filled the tank, and headed north. At first the drive felt freeing. Big sky, long roads, the sort of silence you rarely get in the city. But as she headed north from Port Augusta she realised she had made a small but significant mistake: she hadn't brought enough water.

At first it didn't seem like a problem. There would be a town soon enough. But the kilometres passed, the day grew hotter, and the water bottle in the console slowly emptied. Suddenly the landscape felt different. The same wide open beauty began to feel a little hostile.

She told the group that something interesting happened to her thinking. She stopped enjoying the drive. She stopped noticing the sky or the colour of the hills. Her whole mind narrowed to one question: *Where can I find water?*

Eventually she pulled into a tiny roadside stop — the kind with one faded petrol bowser and a fridge humming in the corner. She bought several bottles of water and drank half of one bottle before she even got back to the car. She said she had never tasted anything so good.

Later, she laughed about it. She hadn't been in real danger. But the experience stayed with her. She said, "It was strange — once I was thirsty, everything else stopped mattering. I couldn't think about anything else."

That's something most of us recognise. Thirst changes the way we see the world.

And that is exactly where the scriptures bring us in the third week of Lent. The people of Israel are in the wilderness, and the water has run out. Their question becomes urgent and raw: *Is the Lord among us or not?*

And in the Gospel of John, Jesus meets a woman at a well who has come at noon — the hottest part of the day — carrying a jar and, perhaps, a deeper kind of thirst.

Lent, by this stage, has a way of revealing what we are really thirsty for.

In the first week, we name the lie — that God is withholding good, that we are on our own, that we must grasp to survive. In the second, we hear the call to trust — to leave what is familiar and step into promise. But now, by week three, something surfaces that is less theological and more bodily, less conceptual and more immediate:

Thirst.

Exodus 17 is blunt. Israel is in the wilderness. They have been rescued from slavery with undeniable force. They have seen the sea opened. They have eaten manna. They have sung songs of deliverance. And yet, when water runs out, faith runs out with it.

“Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

It is easy to read that and think, *Really? After everything?* But thirst does something to people. It narrows the horizon. It makes the present moment feel final. It makes memory unreliable. And it makes our fear sound reasonable.

Anyone who has walked through even a modest version of wilderness knows this: when you are depleted, you stop thinking in paragraphs and start thinking in gasps. You don't weigh the whole story — you fixate on the missing piece.

That's what happens to Israel. Their complaint is about water, but the deeper question is spiritual:

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

That is the true Massah and Meribah question. And it is not ancient. It is current.

We ask it when the medical test comes back unclear.

We ask it when the budget is tight and the demands are many.

We ask it when prayers feel unanswered, when grief lingers, when anxiety has a voice louder than scripture.

We ask it when life is busy but strangely empty.

*Is the Lord among us or not?*

Moses cries out. He strikes the rock. Water flows. Provision arrives — but notice the tone. It is not serene trust. It is quarrelling and testing. Even the miracle is wrapped in stress.

And then John 4 takes us to another place of thirst.

Jesus is tired. He sits at Jacob’s well at noon. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water — at the hottest time of day. That detail is not incidental. Noon is not when a village gathers. Morning and evening are communal times. Noon is solitary.

This woman is avoiding something. Or someone. Or perhaps the look in someone’s eyes.

And Jesus begins simply: “Give me a drink.”

In that single request, he crosses boundaries that were socially fortified. Jewish and Samaritan hostility ran deep. Men did not typically engage women in public conversation like this. Rabbis did not initiate such exchanges, especially with someone who carries social stigma.

But Jesus does not treat her as a problem. He treats her as a person.

“If you knew the gift of God,” he says, “you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

She hears it as an upgrade. A better system. A kind of spiritual plumbing: *Give me this water so I don’t have to keep coming back here.*

How modern that is.

We want faith to remove inconvenience. We want God to streamline life. We want religion to solve problems in a way that keeps us in control.

But Jesus is speaking of something deeper than convenience.

“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again.”

That line names an entire culture.

We drink from wells that promise life: achievement, consumption, productivity, reputation, control. We tell ourselves, *If I just get through this week, if I just finish this project, if I just make that change, if I just get that role, if I just secure that relationship, I'll finally feel settled.*

And then we arrive — and it doesn't settle us. The thirst returns.

Because the problem is not effort; it is source.

Jesus is not offering her a better bucket. He is offering a new spring.

“The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Not a tap you turn on when you feel spiritual. A spring within. A transformed interior life.

Then Jesus touches the sore point: “Go, call your husband.”

We often misread this as moral policing. But watch how he does it. There is no cruelty. No public exposure. No shaming. He speaks truthfully, but gently. He names what has already been heavy in her life.

Her response is the response of many who are cornered by truth: she pivots to theology. “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain...”

And Jesus receives even that. He lifts her understanding beyond tribal arguments into worship “in spirit and truth.”

Lent 3 is often where we begin to realise the point is not *behaving better*; it is *being healed at the level of desire*.

What are you thirsty for?

Not what should you be thirsty for — but what are you actually reaching for when you feel empty?

For some, it is approval.

For some, it is control.

For some, it is constant activity — because stillness brings feelings we'd rather not face.

For some, it is certainty — the sense that if we can just explain everything, we won't have to trust.

For some, it is comfort — not comfort as kindness, but comfort as avoidance.

Israel's thirst led to testing. The woman's thirst leads to encounter.

And then the most telling detail: she leaves her water jar behind.

That jar was the reason she came. It was the object she carried, the tool for coping, the symbol of her daily burden. She doesn't throw it away in disgust. She simply forgets it — because something larger has happened.

She runs to her village and becomes, astonishingly, an evangelist: "Come and see..."

The one who avoided the village at noon now draws the village toward Jesus.

Romans 5 tells us why this is possible. God's love has been "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." Poured. Not dripped. Not rationed. Not earned after we tidy ourselves up.

Paul presses the timing: "While we were still weak... while we were still sinners... Christ died for us."

In other words: the living water is not a reward for the hydrated. It is a gift for the thirsty.

Lent does not ask you to pretend you are fine. It asks you to come to the well honestly.

And here is the gospel comfort: Jesus is already sitting there.

Amen.