

While reading the gospel text for today and reflecting on the stories it brought to mind, I couldn't help but think of one of my favorite TV personalities from the BBC. James Burke is a science historian who made the series called Connections, and also one called The Day The Universe Changed. He is a consummate story teller and has an amazing ability to string stories together one by one from obscure moments in history to eventually a monumental occurrence more familiar to our world. A good example is his take on how the Protestant Reformation was broadcast across Europe.

According to James Burke, it goes like this: In the 1400's the Black Plague ravaged Europe once again. This seems to have happened at regular intervals every twenty or thirty years and would kill between half and two thirds of the population. This particular time, it was quite deadly and left only a third of the people of Germany alive. The result was, the survivors inherited a lot of real estate and money. They began to buy things with their newfound wealth, clothes especially. This produced a huge pile of old clothes, mostly linen, which makes terrific rags and paper. Now at the time, most writing was done (by those few who could write at all) on vellum, which is made from sheepskin, which is expensive. Now there was an abundance of rag paper available. At the same time, Johannes Gutenberg, a local goldsmith and printer, was borrowing a lot of money to manufacture holy mirrors. His plan was to take them to Aachen where there was to be a religious festival. People in those days believed that if you could catch the light from a sacred object, say a shrine holding a relic of a saint, that they would be doubly blessed with first the light with which they observed a sacred object, and then again with that same light reflected off a mirror one held reflecting that sacred light into one's face. The problem was, there had been a flood in Aachen that year so the religious festival

had been postponed, and Gutenberg was in debit for the mirrors, so, he told his creditors not to worry as he was working on a new, "secret." That secret turned out to be moveable type for his printing press. His moveable type idea was a smashing success and his printing business was in full swing just in time to take advantage of all that high quality cheap rag paper and to print up Martin Luther's 95 Theses for all the populace of Germany to read making the Protestant Reformation an idea whose time had come, and in an inexpensive readable form.

That is a typical example of how James Burke put stories together: a series of events that don't necessarily seem to be related but actually are essential to the progress of the story even if the line of thought might seem a bit meandering at times.

So, I'm going to relate a few stories that trace the history of the Jews' relationship with water and how that speaks to the gospel story we just heard from John 4.

In Chapter 17 in Exodus, we read about Moses leading the children of Israel into the wilderness after their escape from their captivity in Egypt. They had been let go to worship God for three days only. Then they used this opportunity to escaped slavery, evade Pharaoh's army, and now they were just learning how to exist in the desert. They had been fed with manna by God, but had not yet located any oasis and were running out of water. They were thirsty and began to complain to Moses saying, "Why did you bring us out into the desert if we are just to die of thirst, and our livestock as well?" Moses spoke to God telling Him that the people were about ready to stone him because they had no water. God commanded Moses to take the staff he had used to turn the Nile into a river of blood, and go with the elders to a rock at Mt. Horeb. When he reached the rock, he struck it with his staff and water poured out of the ground. This was water from God, artesian water, what the Jews call "living water." After all, it was God's gift so it was the best water, the water of life, salvation and purity. This became the benchmark for the best kind of water in Jewish thought. When people wanted to use water for rites of purification, artesian water was the water of choice. It flowed on its own as if it had a life of its own. It was living water. There are of course other kinds of water, rain water, river water, well water, lake water, cistern water, but in the Jewish mind, artesian water was the top of their water hierarchy.

At the wedding feast at Cana, John relates the story in chapter 2 where Jesus performed his first recorded miracle. You remember the story: Jesus and his Mother Mary were invited to a wedding feast in Cana. Cana is a small town just west of Nazareth. The wedding feast had been going on for some time and the wine gave out. Mary tells Jesus about the problem and Jesus gives a reply that sounds a little snippy like, "What does that have to do with you or me? My hour has not yet come." I'm hoping something got lost in that translation because I never spoke to my Mother this way that I recall. Mary ignores Jesus' protestations and tells the servants to follow Jesus' instructions. Now in the house where the wedding feast was taking place, there were six stone jars for the Jewish rites of purification. Since this was before germ theory or the invention of soap, it really was just a rite of purification. The prescribed amount of water to be used to rinse one's hands was that which an eggshell might hold: perhaps two or three ounces. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars to the brim and then changed the water into wine. Not only wine, but, according to the chief steward of the wedding feast, the best wine, which was usually served first, but Jesus had presented it much later in the celebration. Now these stone jars are often glossed over in the story, but they were very special. They were stone jars, not pottery. Only water that had never touched pottery or leather or wood was considered pure enough for the rites of purification. Stone jars during the time of Christ were expensive and quite rare. In excavations of ancient Jewish sites from the 1st century, stone jars are seldom found, much less six of them, and they are usually small because they are difficult to make. They have to be chiseled to shape, and then the inside had to be ground out using sand and a lot of effort. A family might own one small stone jar, but not six large ones. This

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is comparable to my saying, "I have a Rolls Royce in my garage." I might have one, but it is implausible that I would have six. The six stone jars at the wedding feast were large, able to hold twenty to thirty gallons each. This means they were probably rented, as are a lot of things at weddings. Since they were used for the rites of purification, they were filled with "living water." The water in the jars became wine through a miracle performed by Jesus, a foreshadowing of the Last Supper where Jesus said the bread and wine were his body and blood, shed for many to remove their sins, the ultimate rite of purification.

The Jews have a ritual bath called a Mikva in which they perform an immersion rite of purification. They were used in antiquity and still are in use today, though with less frequency. Their use can be for special occasions such as weddings, or preparation for a special life event, and there are Orthodox Jews who still use them every day. They are small, about the size of a broom closet, normally found at the end of a short flight of steps leading down to a subterranean chamber. It is filled with water coming from a spring or cistern, but some modern day Mikvas are filled with tap water out of convenience. After washing elsewhere (remember, no soap is to be used in a Mikva), you go down the stairs and enter the Mikva. At some point, you completely submerge, push off with your feet, and curl up into a ball, much like a fetal position. At this time, you are touching nothing but living water, much like you were in your Mother's womb. You hold this position for a moment and then you are done. The ritual of purification is complete and you are "born again" so to speak.

John 4 The Samaritan Woman by the well.

The story related in John chapter 4 is a story of inclusion and redemption.

Jesus was on his way back to Galilee from Judea. To get there, He had to pass through Samaria the area just north of Jerusalem. There were other routes, but I think Jesus was intentional about his path that day. Jesus seems to always have had a soft spot for Samaritans. They were a related group to the Jews, descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, but often maligned because of their religious practices. In those days, the Jews believed that first, God dwelled in the Temple and that to worship Him properly, one had to go to the temple in Jerusalem and offer up sacrifices for worship, repentance, thanksgiving and so on. And secondly, to offer a sacrifice anywhere other than the temple was simply wrong.

However, Samaria is a long way from Jerusalem and if the Samaritans had followed this practice of performing all sacrifices only at the temple at Jerusalem, they would spend most of their lives traveling to and fro just to follow this rule. So, they went to a less travel intensive method of worshipping God at their local, "High Places" (Mt Gerazim) local places of worship as a time saving measure. I believe that Jesus had great sympathy for this solution as He knew that God did not dwell only in the Temple but was universal and would be present wherever two or more are gathered to worship Him.

There were other reasons for the separation of these two peoples, but this was their major disagreement.

On his way to Galilee, he stopped at the town of Sychar in the territory that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. There was the famous and ancient well of Jacob. Jacob, the

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father of the twelve tribes of Israel, had dug this well some 1900 years before this story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well. Think of that. There was almost as much time between Jacob and this story as there is between us and Jesus' life on earth. Jesus waits at the well for the Samaritan woman and then asks her for a drink. She is shocked that he would even speak to her as there was simply no interaction between Samaritans and Jews. She balks at his request but Jesus answers that if she knew who was doing the asking, that she would be asking him for a drink because he would have given her "Living Water" and then throws in, that anyone who drinks of Jacob's well will thirst again, but if they drank his living water, they would never thirst again. She is intrigued and asks for this living water, and then Jesus tells her to go bring her husband. She clearly is not understanding his message, or perhaps is offering her an artesian well as she says that this living water would save her the trip to Jacob's well, so Jesus takes the conversation to the next level. The Samaritan woman admits that she has no husband and Jesus proceeds to amaze her by telling her that she had had five husbands and that her present significant other was not her husband, and she is amazed. Often, commentators go on to talk about the woman and her husbands, but as our old friend Larry would say, "It's not about the husbands." It's about the living water.

Jesus' encounter in Sychar with the Samaritan woman is no accident. He knew that she would be there, just as he knew her whole history. But Jesus was setting the stage for our own redemption. God's Chosen People had been cared for through the centuries by prophets, judges, kings and God himself. Now it was time to call more people into the fold. Jesus left the 99 sheep in search of those who were lost. Jesus stopped at

Sychar to begin the redemption and restoration of the Samaritan people. Later, when he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, with one story he completely changes the meaning of "Samaritan" in people's minds. First he looked for his lost Jewish brethren, and then, on the road to Damascus told Saul of Tarsus in a vision to continue his work and take the Good News to the gentiles, ourselves included. We have received the Living Water from God through Jesus that we may be purified with the best water, the living water of God's word and given eternal life through him. Amen