

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota
March 23, 2014

John 4:5-42
Exodus 17:1-7
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

ADULT MESSAGE

My mom taught me to be very careful and safe. I believe it was my Mom who taught me to be afraid of heights. I remember as a child, crawling on hands and knees out onto the U.S. highway #61 bridge across the river at Gooseberry Falls along the north shore of Lake Superior. My dad was already standing out in the middle of the bridge, laughing, calling us forward, and telling us not to be afraid. But Mom and I were afraid and never made it to the middle of that gorgeous overlook.

I drove on **hell road** just a few days ago. My wife and I had the once-in-a-lifetime privilege to visit Hawaii in celebration of our fortieth wedding anniversary. On Maui, we were out on our own exploring the northwest coast. It was a beautiful highway, four lanes at first, then two, nice wide shoulders, and even though I am deathly afraid of high places, I was quite comfortable behind the wheel. Miles passed and we determined that we would continue on and loop back through the center of the island rather than turn around and return the way that we had already seen.

We came around a sharp corner and there in front of us the highway narrowed to a single lane, with no shoulders. The car ahead of us stopped, turned around and passed us by. I waved, kind of arrogantly, thinking, this is no big deal, we're almost to the other side and four lane highways again. I am not sure what possessed me. My wife sat speechless as we continued on down the hill ahead. After about half a mile, I was starting to get nervous. We reached the inside curve, crossed a little stream on a single lane bridge and started back up toward the outside curve of the mountain. There was no place to turn around...

How many of you are a little intimidated by high places? As I inched forward on a little strip of blacktop too narrow for two small cars to pass, I grew more and more fearful, tense, short of breath. As I drove, my head and shoulders leaned more and more across the center console toward my wife's side of the car. Moving at about two or three miles an hour, I finally gained the top of the ledge, crawled around the corner and discovered,

thanks be to God, a pull-off where an abandoned concession stand stood and a half dozen cars had stopped. We stopped too. My entire body shaking, I climbed out of the car. Looking down the highway ahead, I could see the same one lane road running back down the mountain and starting back up again until it disappeared around the next corner.

We stood at that pullover for a long time. We discussed our predicament with all of the others huddled there on the edge of doom. Go forward or go back. Finally someone came through from the other direction, a person who lived there and had made the trip several times. **“Are we almost through this single lane road?” “No, I’m afraid not. You have another twelve miles until you get back to the two lane highway. But you can do it. Just go slow. Honk your horn at each corner. You’ll be alright.”**

You know me. **I’m the guy who is always telling people to have faith in God**. There on the edge of that cliff, where was my God? Where was my faith? I think that I was praying **“God help me”** the whole way up that mountain, but I’m not sure that I was expecting an answer. One of the other women who waited there with us said, **“God will take care of us.”** Those were good words, but my own heart and mind were not hearing and believing them very well. Paralyzed with fear, I couldn’t see how I was going to get back down that mountain...

Where is your hellish place? Where do you find yourself overwhelmed with fear? Where are you uncertain about whether to go forward or to go back? Or about who is with you?

The people of Israel were on the **wilderness road** headed toward the Promised Land. The place they stopped to camp had no water and so they began to grumble to Moses. **“Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” “Is the Lord among us or not?”** Then Moses brought their complaints to God and God told Moses to go to a certain rock at Horeb. There he was to strike the rock with the same staff that he had used to part the waters when the Israelites were escaping from the Egyptian army. God said, **“I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”**

The **Biblical wilderness** is always seen as a place of great depravity/need. People are often found trapped, with no way out. **“Why are we suffering?”**

Is God here or not?” These ancient people of God, faced with overwhelming thirst, forgot that God had already **delivered them from slavery** in Egypt, **saved them from the pursuing Egyptian army** and in the previous chapter of Exodus, **provided manna/bread** for them to eat when they were starving. In the face of each of their true human needs, the **wilderness still remained, but so did God** and their promised deliverance.

In our Gospel text from John, a **Samaritan woman** came out to get water from the village well. She was traveling on a **hellish road** too. She came in the hottest part of the day. She met Jesus there. He asked her to pull some water out of the well for him. You’ve heard the story before. Samaritans were hated by the Jews. Men should not be speaking to strange women. She was bold enough to ask Jesus, **“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”**

You know the story. Jesus answered her, **“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”** The woman said to him, **“Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?”** ...Jesus said to her, **“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”** The woman said to Jesus, **“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”**

It’s here that she realizes that Jesus is talking about **really good water**. He asks her to go and get her husband and come back. Long story short, she has had five husbands and is living with a fellow who isn’t her husband right now. I used to think that this meant that she had been unfaithful to many husbands or something. But, there is no word of condemnation from Jesus. Who knows how she lost those husbands? Who knows if she isn’t presently living with a former husband’s brother because there is no one else to take care of her? **I don’t know how she got to where she is, but she has clearly been on a hellish road**. And her answers indicate that she **knows about the Jewish faith**. She knows that God has promised to send a **messiah to save God’s people**. **But, she hadn’t met Jesus** until that hot, lonely day there in her own personal wilderness. She didn’t know

about the kind of **water that God alone can give which bubbles up and gives life inside of us every day and forever.**

This Samaritan woman had come looking for some water in the heat of the day, probably because she didn't feel comfortable coming when all the other women were there. Now, having met Jesus, and having learned the **depth of his awareness of her life** and of his **concern for her well-being**, she goes back to town and tells all the people, "**Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?**" Jesus knew everything she'd ever done. Jesus offered her living water, the kind that only God can give. She went and told everybody. Our text concludes, "**Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony... And many more believed because of his word.**"

Jesus visited the Samaritan woman in her own hot, dry wilderness. **Where can the people of God find Jesus?** According to our Exodus passage and to our Gospel text, God's people will find God wherever they need deliverance from slavery, rescue from the pursuing army, food, water, or a new shot at life lived in the love and care of God. According to God's Word, **Jesus is our constant travel partner** – on the wilderness road, in the heat of the sun, in our most desperate places, on the edge of the cliff...

Here is the text message that I sent to our kids when Jennifer and I arrived safely back at the two lane highway:

Thought it might be life insurance collection day today... Hundreds of feet above a thundering Pacific Ocean... "Drive at your own risk..." Rental car "no coverage zone..." Single lane, mountain road, pull over spot 1/4 of the way across and twelve more miles to go. Go forward? Go back? I did the only reasonable thing – go back with Jennifer driving and me covering my eyes... We made it!

Mom taught me to be very **careful and safe**. But Mom also taught me to **have faith and to trust Jesus no matter what.** That day, somehow, Jesus got me to let go and let God. I gave up the steering wheel, complained about going too fast, getting too close to the edge... Almost right away, we came to a place where we had to pass four oncoming cars. We tried pulling up against the inside edge of the cliff, even scraped the bumper against it. No good, they couldn't slip past. Jennifer had to back

the car up the mountain road for maybe 100 feet before we regained a spot wide enough for them to pass with their mirrors almost touching ours...

Where do we get that living water, Jesus? In Hawaii, in Aitkin, where you live, work, play, in the face of death, in survival, in recovery, in this life and in the one to come. **Jesus knows something about wilderness places**, about **being on the road to hell**, about **hanging over the edge of a cliff on a cross**. Jesus knows **everything about you and me**. He died. Rose again. Came back and said, **“I’ll love and care for you no matter what, now and forever.”**

Every time I get on an airplane, as we are just heading down the runway, I pray. **“God, thanks for loving me. I love you too. Thanks for Jennifer, Leah, John, Maisi, Sarah, John, Mom and Dad, Ma and Pa, all of my family and thanks for you. I am yours. Everything will be alright. Thanks for everything. Amen.”**