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Third Sunday in Lent  
Year A

Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 95  
Romans 5:1-11  
John 4:5-42

### Knowing God's Heartbeat

Have you ever sat on a hillside or a park bench and looked at the clouds? As the wind pushes them across the sky you can start to see shapes appear and disappear. This game can be especially fun with young children because of the inherent joy of a child's imagination which, to many adults, means that you are never really quite sure what they are seeing. Sometimes as adults our imaginations can become accustomed to the various boundaries that we have learned as we have grown older. However, a child hasn't learned many of those yet and you can tell when you are looking at the clouds picking out animal shapes. What *you* might see as an indistinct blob of a cloud with no perceptible resemblance to anything they might see as a roaring lion or a turtle or a whale. But no matter how hard you try, no matter how much you contort your eyes and free your mind you just can't see it. It's kind of like those old Magic Eye posters that at first glance look like rhythmic patterns of colors and tiny shapes, but to the trained mind can reveal 3D images. [Magic Eye poster]

Or sometimes we might look at something and we are convinced as to what it is and we miss that it actually might also be something else. [B&W old and young woman] [B&W tilted lines]

This is all fun and games but our minds can also play tricks on us with regard to our faith too. Or, more precisely, our minds will be so focused on one thing that we miss what might actually be intended; the proverbial 'missing the forest for the trees' - focusing only on small details and failing to understand the larger plans or the big picture. We have examples of this very concept in both this week's gospel lesson as well as last week's.

Just to remind us, last week we heard the story about the Pharisee Nicodemus coming to Jesus and talking to him about Jesus' signs and miracles and Jesus proceeded to tell Nicodemus that no one would fully grasp the kingdom of God and 'see it' unless they were born from above - or born again. To our modern Christian ears the phrase being 'born again' is often familiar enough to many of us that it won't trip our intellectual 'radar' and cause any confusion. But imagine hearing the phrase 'born again' for the first time, like Nicodemus did. He was understandably confused! And we see that confusion expressed in Nicodemus' questioning of Jesus, "What do you mean? How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" (John 3:4) So, Jesus proceeded to elaborate and to explain himself more fully to which Nicodemus replied, "I don't get it."

That was last week, and then this week we see a very similar experience with Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. This is a very complex story on many levels, but in one respect it all starts rather benignly with a simple question from Jesus to the woman asking if she could help him get a drink from the well because he was thirsty after stopping to rest on what was going to be a very long journey. When she challenges Jesus and reminds him that Jews, like Jesus, were not supposed to even talk to Samaritan's like her Jesus changes the course of the conversation and starts talking about "living water." Once again, to our modern Christian ears the phrase 'living water' is poetic and spiritual, but to her - hearing it uttered for the first time in human history - she

was a little baffled. And when Jesus goes on to explain that this water will cause you to never experience thirst again, once again (like Nicodemus), his explanation isn't really helping her confusion.

It's easy to get a little chuckle about these stories of 'Jesus-speak' confusing certain individuals, but this strikes at something quite compelling ... if we have eyes - or hearts - to see it.

If you've been around me recently hearing my sermons or sitting through one of my Bible studies you may have noticed that something has really grabbed my attention as of late. It all started several weeks ago in my sermons about Jesus calling his first disciples and the characteristics of discipleship; particularly that Jesus insists that he is of first importance in the hearts of his disciples. And we posited the following week in a conversation about the Beatitudes what would our lives and this world look like if Jesus and his purposes were the priority in our lives? Then there were other conversations, sermons, and studies all leading to last week when we talked about our hearts and pondered what things would look like if we believed God with our whole hearts - our whole being - like Abraham did. In other words, God is in pursuit of our hearts - the totality of who we are - and he doesn't simply want to know our hearts, but instead, he wants our hearts to know his heart - to be conformed to his heart.

And that got my imagination going! Or, shall we say, my heart going. The beating of my heart quickened, and I began to wonder. "I've got a pretty decent grasp of my own heartbeat. I know it's rhythm. I know what makes it race and I know what makes it slow down. I know it so well I don't even need to think about it." But I wonder how well I know the heartbeat of God? Because that seems to be what Jesus is driving at in his conversations with Nicodemus and the woman at the well. He seems to be driving at something deeper, something more vast and mysterious. It's like when Jesus talks with Nicodemus about the kingdom of God he doesn't mean what we would picture as an earthly kingdom. But what is a spiritual kingdom - what is the kingdom of God? And when Jesus is talking to the woman at the well he clearly isn't talking about water that you draw out of the ground to quench your thirst. What is water that will, in Jesus' words, "gush up to eternal life?" This is all as if the cadence and rhythm of Jesus' intent and heartbeat is different than what we might immediately perceive it to be. What is the heartbeat of God? That is the question that has been luring me in over the past several weeks.

One individual who seems to be further down the path of learning the heartbeat of God was the apostle Paul. Through years of trials and tribulations he came to say such things as this, "Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely." (1 Corinthians 13:12, NLT) We'll see it all! And today you may not have realized it, but you got a glimpse of what it means to see it all and how to start to know the heartbeat of God.

You may not have realized it because we only got part of the instance that I am referring to. Today in our Old Testament lesson we heard about God's provision of water for the Israelites on their escape from slavery in Egypt. Like we heard today, God provided water for them by having it gush forth from a rock. Roughly 1500 years later the apostle Paul was reflecting on those days when God saved his people from slavery and provided food and water for them and Paul didn't simply recount the great miracles that manna from heaven and water from a rock were. He seemed to see beyond the earthly greatness of miraculous provision and tap into something vast and spiritual. I would suggest that Paul saw something deeper when his heart was more closely aligned with the heart of God. Once Paul's heartbeat began to align with God's heartbeat phrases

like being 'born again' and 'living water' became understandable to Paul and something like water from a rock 1500 years earlier took on a whole new meaning for Paul and for us. Here's what Paul says, "All of [the Israelites in the wilderness] ate the same *spiritual* food, and all of them drank the same *spiritual* water. For they drank from the *spiritual* rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ." (1 Corinthians 10:3-4, NLT, emphasis added)

What! How was Jesus there? That was 1500 years before Jesus walked on this earth!

And that is exactly the same type of question that Nicodemus and the woman at the well asked themselves. "How can this be!?" And Paul gave us a glimpse of what seeing the world is like when we live in the heartbeat of God. We see being 'born again' differently. We see 'living water' differently. We even see water from a rock differently. How did Paul put it? "We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!" (1 Corinthians 13:12, *The Message*)

And you know where that left me? It left me reflecting on the thing that will draw our hearts ever closer to God and into knowing his heartbeat. Prayer.

I wish I had more time today, suffice it to say though, I wonder if my understanding of prayer might be a touch like Nicodemus' understanding of being 'born again' or the woman's understanding of 'living water' or the Israelites understanding of water from a rock - an understanding that is clouded by the things of this world. And I found my heart being drawn into desiring a more full understanding of prayer. And my prayer is that your hearts will be drawn there as well - drawn to the heart of God through prayer - as we continue our journey through Lent towards Easter.

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in his wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,  
in the light of his glory and grace.*

("O soul, are you weary and troubled?", Helen Howarth Lemmel, 1863-1961)