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Exodus 17:1-7

John 4:5-14

THIRSTY

Scientists have learned a lot in recent study of the human brain in understanding what triggers the sensation of thirst. They have discovered that the body's primary 'thirst center' is the hypothalamus, a small structure deep in the brain that regulates a variety of bodily needs. Special sensors in it are constantly monitoring the blood's concentration of sodium, as well as blood volume and pressure – it's not just your doctor's office that does that. If the concentration of sodium is too high or the blood volume is too low because of bleeding or even perspiration, the hypothalamus sends out a strong signal: "Drink something now!"¹

The story in Exodus helps us know that the hypothalamuses of the Hebrews were in overdrive when they as recently-liberated people had been wandering in the wilderness without recent access to water. They needed to drink something very soon, according to this small part of their brains they didn't even know existed. They were beginning to doubt whether this God existed that Moses had told them about. He had told them that the One who had brought about their release from slavery in Egypt had their best interests at heart. However, with keen awareness of their vulnerability out in the wilderness, things had gotten tense. Can you say, "Sweaty palms?" Can you say, "Hyper hypothalamus?" Can you say, "A Desperate Thirst?" Perhaps you would if you were here. The people shook their fists at God saying, "Show us a river or a lake or at least an oasis, and we'll acknowledge that you exist." Thinking they were in a godforsaken place, a full-scale revolt was about to happen, even if that meant stoning Moses and high-tailing it back toward Egypt. Their fears for their lives were legitimate. Their lives were at risk, and those fears were powerful indeed.

What they did not realize was that they had a God who was monitoring their situation even more closely than were their own hypothalamuses. They had a God who knew how to provide what they needed for life even when it was hard to come

by. They had a God who told Moses and the elders not to look for the obvious sources of water, but to trust in divine guidance even enough to pound on a rock in order to see what would happen. And the water that saved their lives flowed. Perhaps there was an untapped spring beneath that rock, but clearly, even though the people had acted in ways that showed they were not filled with faith, the Lord provided for their physical needs in a way to also meet their spiritual needs.

In John's gospel account, we also heard a story about Jesus expressing his own human need. After walking a ways, he obviously had a hypothalamus that told him he was thirsty. He and his disciples had been in Jerusalem and as they traveled north back toward Galilee, they followed a route most Jews would not have dared taken. They took the short cut through Samaria, a region of a people at odds with the Jewish people. Samaritans and Jews did not share things in common, even things like water cups and conversation. But while his disciples were in town buying some food, Jesus was sitting by a well, waiting for someone to come by who had a bucket, someone who might be willing to give him a drink. A Samaritan woman shows up to fill her water jar to address her daily need and she is surprised to hear a man ask her for water. That would have been considered quite forward in that culture, and it was particularly surprising that a Jewish man was asking her, a Samaritan woman, for anything. That kind of social distancing was unhealthy, and Jesus showed how to overcome such barriers. When she asked him why he was asking her for a drink, Jesus responded telling her that if she knew who he was, she would be asking him for a drink, and he would give her living water.

In common understanding, 'living water' had to do not with well water, but with water that moved like that which makes up a stream. For a moment there was some confusion. Last week, we looked at the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus that took place at night between the unconventional rabbi and the ultimate insider who was searching for something. This conversation at the well takes place at noontime between Jesus and someone who would have been considered very much an outsider. She may well have been physically thirsty, but there was also a thirst that went beyond the physical. In her life, seemingly cut off from community, she may have felt godforsaken. In both conversations in the third and fourth chapters of John, Jesus used figurative imagery that is confused as literal description. We

ourselves know to some extent what it is like to be thirsty for a big glass of cool water. As the warmth of spring days returns, we may have been outside getting the garden ready for planting, or taking the bike for a spin. We can do things like that and maintain social distancing, and recently it has actually been warm enough to perspire a bit. It feels good to be outside without having to bundle up and it feels good to have something cool to drink when we have been exercising.

God created us with a need to drink liquids on a regular basis. We need to do so to live. God also gave us something in our brains to tell us of that need. But there are also spiritual thirsts that are related to and that go beyond our physical needs. We share all of that in common, even with those with whom we share little else. Those who struggle with issues of addiction could tell us how trying to meet a physical longing in unhealthy ways has left them empty, longing for even more of the alcohol or drugs that filled their lives in unfulfilling, destructive ways. The twelve step principles of Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous recognize that addiction has physical components to it, but there are spiritual longings involved as well and a sense of wholeness will not come without addressing both areas. There are other people who try to ease a spiritual longing within them by a relentless pursuit of money or power or fame. We have seen plenty of public figures who, when they get a taste of what they are pursuing, end up with an even greater thirst for it. At times, their lives are left feeling emptier than when they began.

Jesus turned a conversation about a mundane drink of water into a spiritual encounter that was more quenching than any cool drink could be, because it led to a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. He was not offering just free advice, he was offering the richness of a relationship with the One who has made us all, One who helps us know even when we feel in physical jeopardy, that we are not godforsaken in the least. He was expressing what Augustine, an early bishop from northern Africa did in writing about God, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”²

A child has been put to bed at night and the parent hears the little voice calling for a drink of water. A cup is brought and the words, “Good night,” are once again shared. Then a few minutes later, once more that little voice is calling out for

another drink of water. The thirst is for more than just water. It is a thirst for the presence of one who is loving, who can meet needs in a way that overcomes all the fears that keep us awake at night. I don't know where in the brain or the psyche or the soul our spiritual thirst resides, but it will not ultimately be filled with anyone other than the One who made us. Can you say, "the deepest relationship?" Can you say, "deep thirst fulfilled?" Can you say, "Yes!?" And may all the people of God, from wherever you are watching this, say, "Amen."

¹ <http://www.brainfacts.org/brain-basics/neural-network-function/articles/2008/the-neural-regulation-of-thirst/>

² The Confessions of St. Augustine, edited by John K. Ryan, Image Books, 1960, p. 43.