



BREAKING OPEN

the **LECTIONARY**

Includes
Solemnities
that replace
Sunday
Readings



CYCLE A

*Lectionary Readings in their Biblical Context
for RCIA, Faith Sharing Groups, and Lectors*

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brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." The author of 2 Timothy does not want the community to be disturbed by false teachers. Rather, as the disciples learned at the transfiguration, the community should listen to Christ.

Questions for Breaking Open the Word groups are on page 12.

Questions for other faith sharing groups

1. In what ways do you listen to Jesus Christ?
2. Do you think of God and you as having mutual responsibilities to each other? What are God's responsibilities to you? What are your responsibilities to God?
3. Do you agree with the author of 2 Timothy that people are saved not through their own works but through Jesus Christ's saving actions? What effect does this belief have on the way you live your life?

Bible study questions

1. What do Moses and Elijah represent in the story of the transfiguration?
2. What is the story of the transfiguration teaching?
3. What does God tell Abraham to do in today's reading? What does God promise Abraham?
4. What are the pastoral letters? Why are they called pastoral letters?
5. Why do scripture scholars think that Paul was not the author of 2 Timothy?

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

John 4:5-42 in its biblical context

As we read John's story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman we see a pattern that we will find throughout John's Gospel. Jesus will have a conversation in which he uses metaphors to talk about spiritual things. Those to whom Jesus is speaking will misunderstand Jesus' intent because they understand his words literally. The misunderstanding gives Jesus the opportunity to clarify his meaning. John uses this method because he is trying to teach his audience to think allegorically, to see levels of meaning. Through his Gospel John hopes to help his end-of-the-century contemporaries *see* that the risen Christ is in their midst.

Jesus comes to a Samaritan town. Jews considered Samaritans to be unclean because they were the descendants of the northern tribes, who intermarried with their Assyrian conquerors after the fall of the northern kingdom. Jesus does something completely unexpected

when he initiates a conversation with the Samaritan woman, not only because she is a Samaritan, but because she is a woman. John makes this clear as he tells us that the disciples "were amazed that he was talking with a woman."

Jesus says, "Give me a drink." The woman is taken aback by the impropriety of the request. She says, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?"

Jesus then makes the statement that the woman misunderstands. He says, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

Jesus is, of course, speaking of spiritual things. The living water that Jesus has to give is baptism. The sacrament of baptism is one of the ways in which John's audience can be with Christ, if only they can *see* that this is true. The woman, however, understands *water* to mean water. She points out to Jesus that he doesn't have a bucket so he couldn't possibly give her water, unless it were a miracle. Not even Jacob, the ancestor after whom the well is named, could do such a thing. Does Jesus think he is greater than Jacob?

The woman's misunderstanding gives Jesus an opportunity to elaborate: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

If John's audience shared the woman's original misunderstanding, there is no way they could continue to misunderstand. The water that leads to eternal life is baptism. However, the woman does not yet understand. She says, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." To her, *water* still means water.

Jesus now changes the subject. He asks the woman to get her husband. When she responds that she does not have a husband, Jesus commends her for telling the truth. "You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband.' For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." With this statement we can surmise why the woman was at the well by herself in the heat of the day. Given her history, she must have been isolated from the company of the other women who also made daily trips to the well.

The woman does not try to defend herself. Rather, she has her first and partial insight as to the identity of the person with whom she is speaking. She says, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet." She then brings up a matter of dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews: Should people worship "on this mountain," that is, at a temple that had been built in Samaria for worship, or only at the temple in Jerusalem? Remember, by the time John is writing, the temple in Jerusalem no longer exists. It had been destroyed by the Romans. Jesus tells her that the time will come "when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . . . But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth." For John's fellow Christians, worship is

not tied to a geographic place. Rather, wherever people worship, the risen Christ is present.

The conversation then moves on to the identity of the messiah. Here the woman takes another step in recognizing Jesus' identity. Jesus tells the woman that he is the expected messiah. "I am he, the one speaking with you."

It is at this point that the disciples return and are amazed to see Jesus talking with a woman. They have a conversation with Jesus that illustrates the same pattern of misunderstanding that we saw with Jesus and the woman. The disciples urge Jesus to eat something. Jesus says, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." The disciples think *food to eat* means "food to eat." So they say, "Could someone have brought him something to eat?" Their misunderstanding gives Jesus the opportunity to explain. He says, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work."

In the meantime, the woman had been so excited by her conversation with Jesus that she had left her bucket at the well and told everyone she met about her experience. The woman is a true evangelizer. However, she doesn't want people to rely on her word. She wants them to come and see for themselves. She says to her townspeople, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Christ?"

The Samaritans respond to her invitation to meet Jesus. After spending two days with Jesus, many of the Samaritans begin to believe. They then give witness to her: "We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world."

By walking together in faith the woman and her townspeople have moved from understanding that Jesus is a prophet to understanding that he may be the messiah to understanding that Jesus is truly "the savior of the world." Their witness to one another has helped them accept the gift that Jesus wanted to give them all along.

Exodus 17:3-7 in its biblical context

Notice the question that the Israelites are asking in the desert, "Is the LORD in our midst or not?" This question ties today's Old Testament reading to the reading from John's Gospel because this is the very question to which John is responding by writing his Gospel. He wants his contemporaries to be able to see that Christ is in their midst in the church and in what we now call the sacraments: baptism and Eucharist.

Notice too that today's story is presented not as a test of the Israelites' fidelity to God, but as a test of God's fidelity to the Israelites. The people are thirsty and are grumbling about the hardships of life in the desert. When Moses asks God, "What shall I do with this people?" God could have responded, "Remind them that I freed them from slavery, and tell them to stop grumbling." But God does not do that. Instead, God provides them with water. The story is told not to teach that the Israelites should not have grumbled, given

God's mighty acts on their behalf, but to teach that God loves and saves. God did not lead the Israelites into the desert to let them die of thirst but to let them know that their God is in their midst.

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8 in its biblical context

Our Lectionary reading from Romans also emphasizes that God has taken the initiative to save us. We have not earned salvation. Rather, "the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Paul emphasizes this point by saying, "For Christ, while we were still helpless, died at the appointed time for the ungodly." In other words, we were sinners and God took the initiative to save us: "But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."

Christ has offered salvation to the whole human race. However, Paul tells the Romans that "we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand." Paul is saying that it is possible to refuse the gift of love and salvation that God longs to give us. Like the Samaritan woman, we must be open to new insights so that we can receive the gifts that we are offered and through faith come to know that Jesus Christ "truly is the savior of the world."

Questions for Breaking Open the Word groups are on page 12.

Questions for preparing for this week's Scrutiny

1. In what ways have you, like the Samaritan woman, sinned?
2. In what ways have you failed to receive the gifts that Christ longs to give you?
3. What can you do this week to prepare for your baptism?

Questions for other faith sharing groups

1. Who in our society is saying, "Give me a drink"? What is our response to this person?
2. Who in our society are marginalized because they have acted in ways that we believe to be wrong? How do we treat these people? How do you think Jesus would treat them?
3. Do you have positive or negative reactions to the word *evangelization*? What does this word mean to you? Based on today's readings, what do you think it means?

Bible study questions

1. What literary device does John use regularly to help his audience learn to think allegorically?
2. What does Jesus want to give the Samaritan woman?
3. In what way does the woman evangelize?
4. What does the passage from Romans emphasize?
5. To whom has Christ offered salvation?