

Wonder

Volume: 2 Number: 1 Theme: **Water and The Spirit**

Title: **Meeting Christ at the Well on Theophany** Author: **Maria Simakova**

Images of water permeate the hymns of Theophany services. Familiar themes – the revelation of God as Trinity, the sanctification of creation, the Baptism of the Sinless One, the cleansing of our sins – become concrete as we listen to the ancient songs whose language echoes the lectionary readings for this feast. The evangelists' accounts of Christ's Baptism, along with the stories of creation, the parting of Jordan before Moses and Joshua, the miracles of Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah's call to purification, and the sign given to Gideon, shape our understanding of this season.

Despite this wealth of Scriptural imagery, I find myself thinking about the story of the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John. In this remarkable passage, water does virtually everything: from providing a useful conversation starter to revealing Christ as the true protagonist of the Old Testament well stories; from supplying the writer with a vibrant metaphor for Christian life to pointing to Jesus as the Son of God. One thing is missing, however: the living water of John 4 does not cleanse.

This may seem out of season. Doesn't the Church encourage us to reflect on the cleansing mystery of our baptism as we sing about the Lord's Baptism in the Jordan? Shouldn't we take account of our lives and "wash [our]selves, make [our]selves clean" (Is 1:16) as we celebrate the Epiphany of the Sinless Christ? After all, water is the means of purification throughout Scripture: the antidote for various ritual impurities of Leviticus, the agent of moral rebirth for John the Baptist's followers, and, finally, the vehicle of our death to sin in Christ. Perhaps I shouldn't let my thoughts stray from traditional images of Theophany to the strange water of John's well.

Yet I thirst for this water. We Orthodox have become obsessed with cleansing and cleanliness. Not content with incessantly washing ourselves, we inundate our neighbors with "spiritual grooming" advice. I hear priests bemoaning the dissolution of the concept of sin in our society, but, judging by the average length of my and my fellow-parishioners' confessions, we consider ourselves really dirty. We include every little sin on confession "laundry lists" because our focus remains on us – our good Christian standing, our salvation. We take our purity seriously (although not as seriously as the moral and doctrinal pollution of the guy that stands next to us in church or lives next door).

But Christ is not interested in the purity of the Samaritan woman. He simply says, "Give Me a drink" (Jn 4:7). He asks for an action, for a shift of her focus. What is more, He offers Himself to her, since His very pose – sitting by the well of Jacob asking a strange woman for water – brings to mind the ancient patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob, searching for brides in this land. The water of John 4 serves as a means not of purification, but of introduction, the introduction of Christ the Lowly, Christ the Bridegroom. To a careful reader, this water also speaks of Christ Who was Crucified at the sixth hour – the hour He speaks with the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4:6 and 19:14), the hour in which He thirsts (Jn 19:28).

The woman's initial responses are self-involved. She is concerned with religious divisions between Jews and Samaritans, with the comparative "Orthodoxy" of their worship (Jn 4:9; 4:19-20). She even takes Jesus's offer of the "living water" (Jn 4:10) rather pragmatically: she does not want to come to the well anymore. But Christ's gift is not for individual consumption or obsessive ablutions. The "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14) promised by Him is, by definition, other-directed.

As the evangelist tells us, this spring of water symbolizes the Spirit of Christ, given to those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God (cf. Jn 7:37-39), to those who worship the Father "in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). The symbol is not abstract. Christ is the Living Water because He "is poured out like water" (Ps 22:14) on the Cross, offering us water and blood gushing from His side (Jn 19:34). Through dying the shameful death of a common criminal, He gives His Spirit and reveals Himself as the Truth. As the apostle says, Christ, the Son of God, "is He who came by water and blood, [...] not with the water only but with the water and the blood" (1Jn 1:5-6). His very Passion, the pouring out of Christ as the Water of Life, reveals His divinity. Should we, then, use this Water for self-sanctification or, worse, for the cleansing of the perceived taints of others? Or should we follow the Samaritan woman, whose final response is to witness, to give Christ to others, forgetting her religious concerns, forgetting even to be ashamed of the dirt in her past.

I do not want to minimize our need for repentance and cleansing. But I know how quickly my pious reflections on the meaning of baptism morph into passing judgment on my sins and on the sins of others. All too often, Christ the Living Water becomes a means to an end – my cleanliness, my salvation. All too often, I am more concerned with the laws of sacrifice than with sacrificial love. All too often, I recoil from "obvious sinners," crucified and shamed according to my purity rules. And so I am grateful for the living water that does not cleanse. Christ at the well does not care for orthopraxis or even orthodoxy. He requires an action, a shift of my focus: "seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Is 1:17). He wants me to forget my ideas of right and wrong, sin and shame and pour out my life in witness to Him, the Living Water slaking our thirst from the ignominy and loneliness of His dirty Cross.

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Discussion Questions:

Have we Orthodox become obsessed with cleanliness and "spiritual grooming" like the author argues? What would that look like? What would be an antidote to such behavior?

How would you respond to Christ's request for water? How would it compare to the Samaritan women's response?

Do you recoil from so-called "obvious sinners" in your life? What do you think of the author's concluding line? What would that look like?