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Exodus 17:1-7  
John 4:5-14

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

## THIRSTY

Scientists have been studying what happens in the human brain to trigger 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!" <sup>1</sup>

Clearly the hypothalamuses of the Hebrews were in overdrive when the 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, things had gotten tense. Can you say, "Sweaty palms?" Can you say, "Hyper hypothalamus?" Can you say, "A Desperate Thirst?" They 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.

What they did not realize was that they had a God who was monitoring their situation more closely than their own hypothalamuses. They had a God who knew how to provide water 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 flowed. Perhaps there was a spring that was hidden beneath that rock, but clearly, even though the people had been less than faithful, the Lord provided for their physical needs in a way to also meet their spiritual needs.

We also heard a story about Jesus. 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 went on a route most Jews would not have dared. They took the short cut through Samaria, a region at odds with the Jewish people. Samaritans and Jews did not share things in common, even things like water cups and conversation. But while Jesus' 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. 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 both conversations, 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. Some of us may have gotten out during that beautiful day yesterday to begin to get the garden ready for planting, or we got the bike out and took it for a spin, or we took the dog for a walk and actually were warm enough to perspire a bit for the first time in a few months. It felt good to be outside without having to bundle up and it felt good to have something cool to drink when we came in.

God created us with a need to drink 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 go beyond our physical needs. We share all of that in common even with those with whom we share little else. Many of you are aware that we host a number of twelve step groups meeting here each week. The people who come to these meetings could tell us how trying to meet a physical longing in unhealthy ways left them empty, longing for even more of the alcohol or drugs or empty sex that filled their lives in unfulfilling, destructive ways. The twelve step principles 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 assuage 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 could lead 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, that we can know through this Jesus. He was expressing what Augustine, an early bishop from northern Africa did in writing, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." 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 again is that little voice 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. 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 all the people of God said, "Amen."

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