

Running on Empty

Text: John 4:1-15

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Once upon a distant day Pam and I were graduate students living in Boston. We had just finished pretty tough semesters and were more than desperate for a break. So when the offer came to escape to my parent's cottage on the Jersey Shore, *absolutely* nothing was going to get in our way!

Well, except for this one small thing. It was during the gas crisis of 1978 and getting enough fuel to drive 325 miles would be a dicey gamble. Gas stations were rationing purchases at 5 or 10 dollars depending on supply. And to torque it one more notch, at its most generous measure our Chevette held barely 12 gallons.

Still, young, invincible and somewhat nuts, we headed off – the two of us with our beloved cat Phoebe. We made our way down the northeast corridor counting every mile and watching the gas gauge with clinical obsession. Eight hours later, we crested the bridge over Barnegat Bay – two miles yet to go.

The little red needle had dropped beneath "E" and stopped moving entirely. We were running on serious empty. I kept imagining the engine was starting to sputter. But nevertheless, we prevailed and rolled into the driveway on what must have been phantom fumes. Never did a destination feel so sweet!

How does the old saying go? You are only young and foolish once! That may well be. But more than an old adage or a foolish story, I offer it to you as an apt metaphor for life. Really it is, because running on empty can happen in so many ways for any of us. Times when we honestly wonder if we will have the power to keep going.

When our son Tim was a toddler, he had a favorite toy he got for Christmas. It was a battery powered train engine, a noisy little thing that needed no track to run on except the kitchen floor. It whistled and tooted and chugged until the inevitable moment arrived with little boy tears: "My batteries ran out!" Have you ever been there?

Or deeper. A close friend once wrote this in his journal. "Do you ever feel that your bones have grown weary, and your brain clogs, and your creativity goes flat, and your sense of wonder is strangled, and your marriage is neglected, and your kids grow up before you get to know them, and your doctor says you better slow down?"

He was surely running on empty – as we all do at times. He was feeling distant from his source of life – which we all experience now and again. He was having an energy crisis of the soul – and we of the human family are all kin to what that can feel like. I am quite sure that we each have our own best way of naming it, as we have known.

So into the midst of such thoughts we are given this story of Jesus. He was somewhere along his way – in fact in Samaria on the road back to Galilee. It was noontime, only the middle of the day, which is a shorthand way of saying that there was still a very long way to go – he had miles to go before he would sleep.

He was weary, tired and thirsty. He sat down by a well to rest. Just a pause, with that alone, might have some perk-us-up value; to know that Jesus got tired and weary at times, too. And as he took a sit-down rest, along came a woman from Samaria to draw some water from the well.

Small talk between them led to larger talk. Jesus listened to her such that hadn't happened in a long time. And then he offered her something far deeper and more valuable than any kind of water from a well. He spoke with the mystical power of God that is always beyond and beneath and within and above.

"Anyone who drinks of the water in this well will thirst again," he said. "But those who drink from the water that I will give become as a spring of water gushing up with eternal life." Actually, the New English Bible translates it more wonderfully yet: "The water that I shall give will be an inner spring welling up."

Clement of Alexandria, one of the early church theologians, recognized his own inner need and hunger – just as the woman from Samaria did. And because of this story, powerfully eternal, he came to refer to Jesus as "the fountain of his life without which our souls cannot exist."

So let's simply do this now as we come to the Table of Christ. Connect the dots with me. From the foolish adventure of running on fumes to the Jersey Shore; to Tim and his tearful dilemma of batteries gone dead; to my friend and his journal and the depleted state of his soul; to that image from Clement about a fountain of life.

As we do, I think we might find that these varied stands find their way to the mystery at the sacrament set before us once again. Truthfully, I have come to know that when I am running on empty or on fumes or with flat batteries; the remedy is most always grounded somewhere in the realm of the spirit more than anything else.

That's why I hold the story of Jesus by that well-side as my own today. It's why I take the words of the woman looking for water as mine today, too: "Sir, where do I find this living water?" Most important, it's why I trust in the gentle offer of Jesus: "Whoever drinks from the water that I give will become as an inner spring welling up."

And also this: Whoever you are, wherever you are on your life's journey, full of vitality or running on empty, this Table, abundant and eternal is here for us all. Amen.

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