The Man With the Water Jar

Mark 14:12-15

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Mark S. Bollwinkel

[This sermon is delivered while throwing a clay pot on a potter’s wheel in front of the congregation.]

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered between 1947 – 1956 in 11 caves on the northwest corner of the Dead Sea, about 13 miles from Jerusalem. The Scrolls were the libraries of a Jewish sect that hide them around the time of the Zealot-Roman war of the first century (66-70CE).

This sect, located near the caves in what is now called the Qumran community, has been most identified with the Essenes. They were a radical group, who yearning for purity, took to the desert to await the end of the world and coming of the new messiah. Although an important and influential movement contemporary to Jesus’ times, the New Testament doesn’t mention them by name. A number of scholars suggest that John the Baptist could have been a member of the group because of his desert mystic ways such as wearing animal skins and eating wild honey and locust (Mark 1:1-8). He certainly preached about the end of the world, as did the Essenes. So did Jesus in some very significant ways. Having prepared himself for ministry in the desert Jesus may have known the group as well.

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain at least fragments of all of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures, except Ester. There is a complete manuscript of the prophet Isaiah. Their discovery was enormously important for biblical scholarship because these texts were 1,000 years older than any other previous copies of the Bible. The library also contained volumes of other works describing biblical commentary, apocalyptic expectation and a “Manuel of Discipleship” detailing the life of the Qumran community. Scholars are still learning from them and debating their meaning.

The Scrolls survived the 1,900 years in the caves wrapped in fine linen and stored in clay pots.

Pottery is an ancient art and craft practiced throughout the world. Archeologists have discovered intact clay vessels and ceramic objects dating back to 9,000 BCE. Clay is found almost everywhere. The development of ceramic utensils for cooking, food storage and decoration is universal. In Palestine and Israel it goes back thousands of years.

Pottery can be made using hands only, by pressing clay into molds, rolling coils of clay and shaping them with tools, or as is very common spun on the base of a potter’s wheel. Once dried it is fired at high temperatures to vitrify the silica in the clay, thus making it waterproof and bonding the strength of the vessel.

The scrolls were contained in tall cylinders with straight walls and narrow neck, approximately 12-19“tall. This style of pot was quite common as a storage jar. It was often used as the equivalent of our modern day “safe deposit box”. Folks didn’t have banks, as we know them, back in the first century so they would buy these pots, store their valuables in them, and then place them somewhere in their homes, or buried out in the “back yard”, so to speak. A potter would throw a separate lid for the cylinder and then the owner would often seal the lid with wax or animal fats.

A potter worth his or her salt could make a dozen of such storage jars in an hour.

This common, simple ceramic vessel was used to save a library of scripture and history wrapped in fine linen for almost 2,000 years. The contribution to us from those ancient, pious, desert mystics and the potters they used to store the scrolls is priceless.

Chemical and dating analysis suggests that the clay used to form the pots which held the Dead Sea Scrolls came from a clay quarry just outside of Qumran. Along with such storage jars all manner of functional wear was fashioned by the potters of the area.

Clay is cheap, found everywhere and can be made into items absolutely essential for life. It is made of the most common elements of the earth, most of the same elements that make up our bodies.

Consider Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians (4:7), “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” The treasure he is referring is to be the light and love of God, contained in the fragile, mortal and all too tenuous containers of human life. Failure and brokenness are inevitable for any of us, however strong, brave and intelligent. To remain committed to life and love, even when we know we will stumble and fall, is the basis of faith.

To avoid pain is denial, to expect perfection out of our mortality is neurosis. Health and wholeness comes to us when we learn to love each other and ourselves in spite of our failures, just as God loves us.

As horrendous any one moment can be in our lives, we are committed to the entire process of the life that God has given us. As painful and difficult any one moment can be in our lives, it will not have the final say about who we are. After all, it is God who breathed the spirit of life into a bit of clay to create us (Genesis 2:7). It is God who calls us “sons and daughters” (Roman 8:14). The prophet Isaiah, whose scroll was saved in its entirety at Qumran, says four times that “God is the potter and we are the clay” (29:16, 41:25, 45:9, 64:8), God’s love and grace forms our living, and it has the final word about who we are, in spite of our flaws.

The man with the water jar must have known this to be true.

“The man with the water jar” is one of the enigmas of the New Testament. Mentioned only in Mark and Luke we really don’t know who he was. We do know that men did not carry water jars or pitchers in first century Palestine. That was women’s work. Why would a man be out in public view carrying a clay water jar?

Some scholars suggest that the man is a part of a conspiracy to secret Jesus into Jerusalem for the Passover. By this time, government officials were openly plotting Jesus’ arrest and murder (Mark 14:1-3). The Jesus’ movement hoped that he was the new messiah. It was imperative that he celebrated the Passover Festival in Jerusalem when religious and national fervor would be great, and some of the largest crowds would gather. They had to get Jesus into Jerusalem under the noses of the Sanhedrin and Roman guards. Like the secret password between warriors, a man with the water jar could have been a glaring yet silent signal to the disciples of who to trust. They then followed him to the room where they could prepare for Jesus’ arrival.

Some scholars suggest that the man could have been a member of the Essenes. The group was known to practice extreme celibacy and would have required men to perform female roles within the Qumran community, such as carrying water. They certainly had a radical investment in the apocalyptic confrontation that would result from Jesus being proclaimed messiah during the Passover festival. The man with the water jar could have been a member of the community that would eventually bury the Dead Sea Scrolls just a few years later.

The term “water jar/pitcher” is specific to a vessel used domestically in the kitchen or at table. (The potter/preacher is forming a replica of the traditional water jar/pitcher at this time on the wheel). It would have been around 12-24” tall; one wouldn’t want it to be too big as water weighs 8.34lbs per gallon. The jar would probably not have been glazed. The terra-cotta clay used in the region was strong but fired at relatively low temperatures, minutely porous, allowing the pot to “sweat” (allowing sheen of moisture to gather on the surface) and then evaporate, cooling the contents of the jar, an important feature in a desert.

So, although we do not know his name and he is only mentioned in two of the four gospels, we can know that a member of the Jesus’ community had such courage and conviction that he was willing to take the risk of his own arrest to make it safe for Jesus’ participation in the Passover that year. It was in that evening that we call the Last Supper, a ritual meal we now know as sacrament of Holy Communion, when in the sharing of bread and wine we recall God’s unlimited love for humanity in the life, death and resurrection of his Jesus, our Jesus.

This man with the water jar, a nobody in history, acts in faith to facilitate his people’s hope…our hope…for a better future, for the reign of God’s love. Because of his small role in the drama of that evening, we gather here today, 2,000 years later to continue the Jesus community’s investment in God’s future.

Amazing what a simple, everyday kind of person can do when they are inspired to use their gifts in faith. Let’s thank God for the man with the water jar, and the members of the Qumran community, whose passion for God’s future left us the legacy of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Maybe the man with the water jar was one the Essenes potters whose vessels would leave us our clearest touch with history? [At least I like to think so!]

Amazing what simple, everyday kind of people can do when they are inspired to use their gifts in faith.

Amen.