

“Where Do You Get That Living Water?”

Exodus 17:1-7 • Psalm 95 • Romans 5:1-11 • John 4:5-42

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To properly appreciate our Gospel lesson for today, we have to back up a couple verses. John tells us that Jesus “left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.” So let’s pull out our map. Judea is a large region around Jerusalem, a good chunk of the southern part of Israel. Galilee is up in the north. Samaria is the region that lies in between. John says that Jesus “had to go through Samaria,” or, literally, “*it was necessary* that he go through Samaria.” Except ... from a geographical standpoint ... Jesus did not *have* to go through Samaria. We know that there was a major road that ran from Judea to Galilee by way of Samaria. But we also know that he could easily have traveled up the Jordan River valley, and avoided Samaria all together. So when John says that Jesus *had* to go through Samaria, that it was *necessary* that Jesus go through Samaria, that’s not because it was the *only* way to get there. He had a choice of routes. What John means is that there was a *divine plan* at work. *God* was up to something. *God* wanted – or *needed* – Jesus to go through Samaria.

“So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.” Sychar is another name for the ancient city of Shechem, which stood at a crossroads of some important trade routes and had once been the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. In the book of Genesis this had been one of Abraham’s first stops when he arrived in the Holy Land. Abraham’s grandson Jacob spent some time here. John says that “Jacob’s well was there.” The Old Testament does not record Jacob building a well here, but clearly by the first century there was a long-standing tradition that he had done so. There is a deep well right next to the ruins of ancient Shechem, a *very* deep well, 135 feet deep! Four hundred years after Jesus, Christian pilgrims built a church around it, the first of numerous churches built on that site over the centuries. A fairly new Greek Orthodox Church stands on the site today. You can still draw water from that well to this very day. We know this is the same well as the ancient one, because – let’s face it – *you can’t move a well!*

“Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well.” He could have gone into the city. He chose to stop at the well. The place where you go to get water. “It was about noon.” Typically people went to the wells in the morning or in the evening, not at noon. That time is significant. John only mentions the noon hour twice in his Gospel. The other instance is when Jesus is crucified.

“A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’” Let’s think. Does Jesus *really* need someone to fetch water for him? This is the guy who turned water into wine!

“The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)” Ah, here’s the rub. The woman was a Samaritan. Jesus was a Jew. There was a lot of enmity and distrust between the two groups.

Samaritans were partly descended from ancient Israelites who had once lived in that region, and partly descended from foreign colonists that the Assyrians who conquered that region in the eighth century before Christ had brought in to settle the land. They were a mixed race. Some might call them “half-breeds.” Jews of pure ancestry tended to look down on them. The Samaritans, for their part, did not want to worship God at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. They built their own temple instead. And there were other issues. Jews and Samaritans didn’t like each other, they didn’t trust each other, they tended to avoid one another. Most Jews heading for Galilee would have bypassed Samaria. John says, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” Like wells. Or like ... water fountains. One race thinks they’re better than the other. One race doesn’t want to drink from the same vessel that the other drinks from. Build up walls, set people apart, live in segregation. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

Jesus wanted *nothing* to do with that. It was *necessary* – it was *God’s will* – that he go through Samaria. For Jesus is in the business of breaking down the foolish walls that we humans like to build.

“Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink,” you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’” The woman might be able to give Jesus a drink of water from the well. But Jesus can give her water from his *spiritual* well.

“The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’” She doesn’t get it. Not yet. She thinks he’s talking about *flowing* water, water that isn’t stagnant. She wonders if he has some means of getting some kind of water that’s better than what this well can provide. This well has provided the people of her village water for *centuries*. It had been built by an ancestor of both her and him. Could there possibly be better water somewhere else?

“Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’” That must be really good water that this man is offering! She is intrigued. She would *love* it if she never had to draw water again! “The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’”

So Jesus takes this conversation to the next level. If the woman is interested in the *living* water that only he can provide, it’s time for some truth-telling. “Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband,” for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’” There are two different ways to interpret this part of the story. The first is to take what Jesus says at face value. The woman has been married five times. She’s now living with a sixth man, whom she is not married to. She is a colossal failure at marriage and is living an immoral life. This is the way this story is commonly interpreted. Jesus is calling her to account.

But there’s another way to interpret this, a more symbolic way. In John’s Gospel, so much of what appears on the surface points to a deeper and more meaningful truth. What if the woman isn’t just one particular woman with a history of failed relationships? What if she’s representative of the whole Samaritan people? What if the number *five* is representative of something ... like the fact that the foreign colonists in Samaria had come from *five* cities, each with their own god ... and the fact that in Hebrew the word “husband” is the word *ba’al*, which is also a term used to refer to pagan deities ... with the result that the Samaritans, as a whole, had effectively had five “husbands,” five false gods, and the one they were worshiping now they weren’t *really* worshiping, since they weren’t worshiping in Jerusalem? According to this interpretation, when the woman says, “I have no husband,” what she is

saying on a symbolic level is, “My people have no God!” This interpretation is *certainly* plausible.

And who is sitting *right in front of her*? God, in human flesh. God, incarnate.

“The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’” She’s starting to get it. She’s also realizing that this conversation isn’t just about her personal life. It’s about *worship*. The way her *whole people* worships. “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.’” Our worship of God is not tied to a particular *place*. Those who follow Jesus can worship *anywhere*. The word “you” is in the plural form here, just like it was last week, when Jesus was talking to Nicodemus. It continues in the plural form when Jesus says: “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” He’s talking about himself, of course. “But,” he continues, “the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” *How we worship, whom we worship* – those questions are far more important than *where we worship*.

“The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’” This conversation started in one place – “Woman, give me a drink” – but it has quickly progressed. From water, to living water, to the woman’s personal life, to the Samaritans’ way of worship, and now to the proper object of worship: the Messiah, the Christ, the one whom the Samaritans believed would “proclaim all things” to them – just as he has been proclaiming all things *to her*. She is beginning to perceive that she might be speaking with the Messiah himself.

Jesus confirms it. “Jesus said to her, ‘I am he,’ the one who is speaking to you.” When he says “I am he,” the words in Greek are simply “I AM.” *Ego eimi*. They are the *exact same words* that God used at the burning bush, way back in the book of Exodus, when God revealed God’s name, translated from Hebrew into Greek. *Ego eimi*. “I AM.” Anyone who read this Gospel in its original language and was familiar with the Hebrew scriptures would have seen that connection. Jesus is saying, “I am God.”

The story goes on from there. Jesus’s disciples show up. They are pretty much clueless. But the woman goes home and tells her family and friends what has happened at the well. They aren’t clueless at all. “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.” They go to hear him talk. “And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.’” Jesus has *one* conversation with *one* woman. But that conversation leads to a *whole lot of people* turning away from false worship and turning towards Jesus. Not turning towards the Jewish faith, but rather, towards the faith that this Jewish man embodies.

The scriptures do not reveal the woman’s name. Ancient Christian legends call her “Photini.” That means “Luminous One.” She *glowed*. She saw the light. She helped bring her people to the light.

And so the Gospel spreads to an unlikely people, a people that most Jews didn’t think were pure, didn’t think were worthy, didn’t think were righteous, didn’t think properly worshiped God. Humans had built walls of suspicion, mistrust, and disrespect. Jesus brought them all crashing down.

Because Jesus is *living water*. Living water not just for *one* group of people who thinks they’re special. No, this living water is for *everybody*. No matter what foolish walls we humans have built.

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