

“Where Do You Get That Living Water?”

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John 4:5-42

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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Third Sunday in Lent

Today’s Gospel reading is the second of four very special stories, found only in the Gospel of John, that focus in on one particular individual who has a unique encounter with Jesus that leaves them permanently changed. Today’s story is about a Samaritan woman, whose name we do not know, whom Jesus meets at a well. But there is a lot more going on here than just one woman coming to faith.

To properly understand this story, we need to back up a couple verses. Jesus “left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.” Look at a map. Judea was a large region around Jerusalem, in the south. Galilee is up in the north. Samaria lies in between. John says that Jesus “had to go through Samaria,” or, literally, “it was necessary that he go through Samaria.” Except ... the truth is ... Jesus did not *have* to go through Samaria to get to Galilee. Jews in that era traveled between Judea and Galilee all the time, and they did *not* typically go through Samaria. They avoided it. They traveled along the Jordan River valley instead. So when John says that Jesus *had* to go through Samaria, that it was *necessary* for Jesus to go through Samaria, that’s not because it was the only way to get there. What John means is that *there was a divine plan at work. God needed Jesus to go to 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 – hundreds of years earlier – had been the capital of the kingdom of Israel. Hundreds of years before that, Jacob, the ancestor of all the Israelites, had lived in Shechem. John says that “Jacob’s well was there.” The Hebrew scriptures never mention Jacob digging a well here, but by the time of Jesus, there was a very deep well here – 135 feet deep! – and there was a very old tradition saying that Jacob had built it. Four hundred years after Jesus, Christians built a church around the well, the first of numerous churches built on that site over the centuries. You can go to the Greek Orthodox Church that stands there today, and draw water from that very same well. We know this is the same well as the ancient one, because *wells don’t move around!*

“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. “A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’” Now think about this. Does Jesus *really* need her to fetch water for him? This is the guy who turned water into wine! He could summon water out of that well just by *willing* it, if he wanted to. So when he asks her for a drink, he doesn’t *really* need the water. This is his way of starting a conversation.

“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.)” That’s a bit of an understatement!

Most Jews in the time of Jesus *despised* Samaritans. They didn't want anything to do with them. Why? Because they were *different*. Their *ethnicity* was different. Their *worship* was different. Their *beliefs* were different. Even their *scripture* was different. More specifically: Samaritans were *partly* descended from the ancient Israelites, but they were also *partly* descended from foreigners that the Assyrian Empire had settled there eight hundred years before Jesus. So the Jews considered the Samaritans "half-breeds." The Samaritans also did not worship at the temple in Jerusalem. They built their own temple in Samaria, on Mount Gerazim. They rejected all of the Israelite prophets, except for Moses. Their sacred scripture, which is called "the Samaritan Pentateuch," consisted only of the first five books of the Bible, the Jewish Torah, except there were *thousands* of differences. Most of those were just differences in spelling and grammar, but there were also very significant differences in substance. So, most Jews in that era thought that the Samaritans were ethnically impure, that they worshiped in the wrong place, that their beliefs were wrong, and that their scripture was wrong. It was *not* a good relationship!

But Jesus *chose* to go to Samaria. It was *necessary*, in the divine plan, for Jesus to go through Samaria. Why? Because these people needed to know the love of Jesus. They spent their lives being looked down upon by the Jews. Here came a Jew with a very different message. A message from *God*.

Stop and consider: what group of people do *you* most look down upon? Are there any groups of people you routinely scorn? Be honest with yourself! Blacks? Hispanics? Arabs? Muslims? Evangelical Christians? Democrats? Republicans? Gay people? Trans people? Which group of people do you like the *least*? Figure that out – and then do what Jesus does. *Go to that group with love*. That's what he does here. He goes to people who were rejected and despised, to show them God's love.

So Jesus strikes up a conversation with this Samaritan woman, asking her for a drink of water, breaking all sorts of customs in the process. She is *astonished* that a Jewish man would do this, because "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." Jesus says to 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 has gone to fetch well water. She's about to get *spiritual* water.

But she doesn't understand. "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 thinks the "living water" he is talking about is water that *flows*, water that isn't stagnant, like water in a stream. She wonders if this man knows of a better place to get water. Jesus clarifies: "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." So she learns that *this man* gives out water. *Special* water. She says, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

She might have thought Jesus would just hand her some of this special water. But no. It doesn't work like that. He says to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." She replies, "I have no husband." Jesus already knew that, of course. He knows everything there is to know about this woman. If you want to receive living water from Jesus, you need to be prepared to face what Jesus knows to be *true* about you. He says, "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!" The woman has been married five times. She is now living with a sixth man, whom she is not married to. She probably faced judgment from a lot of people for all that. She probably carried around a good deal of embarrassment,

shame, and self-recrimination. But there's something *different* about this man. He knows all these things about her ... *and he's not condemning her*. He's being *kind*. He's even offering her a special *gift*.

There's also another truth hidden in Jesus's words. In John's Gospel, which is full of metaphors and symbolism, there is often a deeper meaning under the surface. Jesus isn't *just* talking about the woman's personal history of failed relationships. He's *also* talking about the Samaritan religion. "Five husbands," he says, but the word for "husband" could also be translated as "lord," and according to 2 Kings 17:24, the foreign colonists that the Assyrian king brought to Samaria had come from *five different places*, and each one of those places had *its own god*. Now, the Samaritans were effectively worshipping a *sixth* god, in their worship on Mount Gerazim. So the Samaritans, as a whole, had effectively had "five lords" in the past, and were now serving a sixth. Jesus's words carried *two different meanings* at the same time. There's one truth about *her*, and there's another truth about *her whole people*.

By this point, the woman has realized that this stranger's words are *uncannily* accurate. She rightly perceives that this man must be speaking on behalf of *God*. She says to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet." She also realizes that this conversation is now about religion: "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus says, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." The word "you" is in the plural form here, just like last week, when Jesus was talking to Nicodemus. It is also 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." Jesus, a Jew, is offering salvation to *everybody*, Jew and non-Jew alike. "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." Jesus is saying that *where* we worship doesn't matter. Mount Gerazim, Mount Zion, here, there, anywhere – *it doesn't matter*. What matters is that we worship in *spirit* and in *truth*. With our *souls*. No pretending; *be real!*

She says, "I know that Messiah is coming." The Christ, the Anointed One. "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." This Jewish stranger has been proclaiming all things to her. She is now wondering: *could he actually be the Messiah?* Jesus confirms it. He says, "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, when God revealed the divine name way back in the book of Exodus. Now it's in Greek instead of Hebrew. *Ego eimi*. "I AM." Jesus is saying, "*I am God.*"

The story goes on. The woman tells everyone what has happened. "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony." They invite him to stay with them. "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's remarkable conversation with one woman ends up bringing a whole lot of people to faith. The scriptures never reveal the woman's name. Ancient Christian legends call her "Photini." That means "Luminous One." She *glowed*. She saw the *light*. And so the Gospel spreads to an unlikely people, a people that the Jews despised. *Be careful who you despise*. Better yet, don't despise anyone at all. For if God wanted even the hated *Samaritans* to experience the love of Jesus, what people in our own day does God want *us* to reach with the love of Jesus? Which people feel *rejected* now, who need to be *loved*?

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