

Well Water, Fresh Water, Spring Water, Living Water

A Sermon Preached by the
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 17:1-7

John 4:5-42

Last week, you might remember, we were introduced to Nicodemus, the Pharisee who comes to Jesus by night. This morning, we meet the Samaritan woman at the well. Both of these characters are unique to the Gospel of John, and we can assume that, since they follow one after another, we are supposed to notice the contrasts between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. The most obvious one, perhaps, is that the Pharisee is named; the woman is not. The Pharisee is a man, a leader of the Jews, an insider; the Samaritan woman is clearly an outsider, marginalized by her community. But she meets Jesus in broad daylight, and goes back to her village to witness to her encounter with the Messiah. Nicodemus arrives under the cover of darkness and fades back into the night asking, “How can this be?” unable to hear that Jesus is sent from God.

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well is one of my favorites. There are so many layers to this story that it’s hard to know where to begin. We could begin with the woman herself, what we know about her, what we don’t; we could begin with women in first-century culture – and we’ll get to that. We could begin with the Jews and the Samaritans and the long-standing enmity between the two and how that plays into this story; or why Jesus chose to go through Samaria on his way from Judea back to Galilee, instead of going an extra day’s journey as most Jews would have to avoid going through Samaria – and we’ll get to some of that too.

But this morning, I want to begin with water, because that’s what keeps the story going. And remember that water also figures prominently in the lesson from Exodus, where we find Israel wandering in the wilderness, quarreling with Moses because they’re dying of thirst. God makes bread, which normally comes from the earth, rain down from heaven, and water – which often rains down from heaven – springs forth from a rock. Water is what keeps the story going.

So, water, water, everywhere. To us, it is the common and ordinary stuff of life, part of our everyday living. We drink it, cook with it, wash with it, water the lawn, swim in it, and waste it – especially in this country and other parts of the world where clean, running water isn’t a luxury, where it is simply taken for granted – as in turning on the faucet in the morning and expecting clean water to pour forth.

But listen to this: according to the International Water Management Institute, “one person out of every three on the planet today lacks reliable access to freshwater, whether because the water is unsafe, unaffordable, or unavailable.”¹ Six thousand children under the age of five die every day because of unsafe water and poor sanitation. That’s more

¹ Charles C. Mann, “The Rise of Big Water,” *Vanity Fair*, May 2007, p. 125.

children dying from dirty water than from HIV/AIDS, malaria, war and accidents, all put together. Water-related diseases are the single largest cause of human sickness and health-related death in the world.

That's not surprising, given the fact that about 2/3 of our body mass is composed of water. We can live without food for about a month. We can live only about four days without water.

Water covers about 70 percent of the earth's surface, the oceans contain about 97 percent of earth's water. If you go to a reliable textbook or online resource, you can find volumes of information about water, including the chemical and physical properties of water, the effects of water on human civilization, the politics, religion and philosophy of water. Water, water everywhere.

Millions of people, mostly women and children, walk probably millions of miles every day to get clean water and carry it back home. And the next day, they do it all over again. And the next day, and the next, and the next.

Now in today's story, the Samaritan woman, like every other woman of her day, has come to the well to get water, probably to drink, cook with, wash with. Like everybody else, she has come for the one thing she cannot live without. She has probably come with a sizable water jar balanced on her head, and she has come out from the city to a place identified as Jacob's well. The well is there today, but there is no evidence aside from tradition that it was dug by or dates from the time of Jacob. According to the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, the well is presently about seventy-five feet deep, partly filled with debris. It is so deep that the water never rises near the top. It's about eight feet in diameter, it narrows toward the top, and it covered with a large stone with a hole in it. The upper portion of the well is lined with masonry, but the lower portion is cut in the soft limestone. It is both a cistern and a spring, as it appears to be fed both by surface water and underground sources.²

But unlike the other women of her day, the other women in the city where she lives, this woman has come to the well at high noon, the hottest part of the day, and she has come alone. Both of those things are very telling. Water was usually drawn early in the morning or in the evening, when it was cool. Unless they were desperate, women didn't come to the well at midday. The well was a place where women gathered to visit, to laugh, to talk about their children, to talk about their husbands. The social aspects of coming to the well were as important as the water itself. It was the one time of the day when they could relax and be with other women.

But this woman had learned that coming to the well when the other women were there only brought humiliation and pain. She wasn't included in the conversation, there were whispers and stares, and when she came near, backs were turned on her. In other words, she wasn't part of the Ladies' Aid Society, or the local chapter of Presbyterian Women. She was clearly outside the circle, marginalized from the only group that she would have logically belonged to,

There has been endless speculation about this Samaritan women, whether she was reputable or not, whether she was an outcast or not. And most of it has been based on her admission that she has had five husbands and that the man she's living with now is not her husband.

² Jacob's Well, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 787.

That's one thing that we know about her. But there's a lot that we don't know about her. For example, we don't really know why she's had five husbands. Given that it was impossible for a woman to obtain a divorce, that certainly wasn't the reason. She might have been caught in that Levirate requirement of Jewish law that said widows were simply passed on to the next oldest brother and maybe the sixth one refused to marry her.

Preaching on this text, pastor Jon Walton said, "Maybe she was beaten, abused, abandoned, hurt. Maybe life was a living hell for her. Who knows? None of us knows what kind of blows another person has taken on her back, or what kind of scars she bears in order to survive. . . . We may be quick to wag the tongue or point the finger or pass the gossip. But the truth is, we don't know."³

Here's something else we do know: it would have been very unusual for a Jewish man to have spoken to a woman, especially a Samaritan woman. The chasm between the Jews and the Samaritans can be traced back to the Assyrian occupation of northern Palestine in 721 BCE. The Jews had intermarried with their captors, losing their religious and racial purity. They were held in contempt by most Jews in Judea and Galilee.

The most intense rivalry began about five hundred years later, with a dispute about the correct location of the proper place of worship. The Samaritans built a shrine on Mt. Gerizim and claimed that this shrine, not the Temple in Jerusalem, was the place where God dwelled. The shrine was destroyed by Jewish troops in 128 BCE, but the rivalry continued.

It would have been even more unusual for Jesus as a rabbi to have spoken to a woman in public. One group of pious men in those days were known to close their eyes when they saw a woman on the street. They were called the "bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because they kept their eyes closed for so long that they stumbled into walls. These were the men who prayed every morning, "Thank God I was not born a woman."

But Jesus' eyes are wide open when he encounters this Samaritan woman and says, "Give me a drink," thus breaking down barriers and breaking through boundaries that had been in place for centuries, and beginning the longest conversation between Jesus and another person anywhere in the Gospels; longer than any conversation Jesus had with his disciples, any of his accusers, or his family.

She's no shrinking violet, this woman. She comes right back with, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" And she's no dummy either. From there, she holds her own in a conversation that takes off and meanders through her allegedly shady past, her present marital status (or lack thereof), the proper place of worship – Mt. Gerizim or the Temple in Jerusalem – the coming of the one who will be called Messiah, and ends with Jesus telling someone for the first time that he is the one they've been waiting for. And how interesting that it should be the Samaritan woman who gets this news.

Interesting, maybe not surprising. After all, think about the beginning of the conversation when Jesus offers her living water, and she responds, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Along with everything else, underneath all the layers, this is a story about thirst. Not simply physical thirst, but deep spiritual thirst. Patricia de Jong, a gifted preacher and the pastor

³ Jon Walton, "Encounter at the Well," sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, March 3, 2002.

of the First Congregational Church in Berkeley, notes that, “It’s a story about being dry and dried up, parched and brittle and all used up by life. . . . It’s a story about this container – our life – and what kinds of things fill our cup – the Cup of our life.”

De Jong goes on, “. . . it is not so much her past that grabs me as her desire to know and move from the literal well water to the water of a living God who will refresh her eternally in spirit and in truth. In our own lives it’s not so important that we linger, stuck in the mud of our past, but that we are willing to move into new life when transforming grace is present.”⁴

This story is overflowing with transforming grace and we know it most clearly when the Samaritan woman puts down her water jar and goes into the city. You can’t carry living water in the same sad, broken, leaky water jar that’s carried failures and betrayals, addictions, pain, shame and sorrow. You can’t carry living water in the same old water jar of anger and bitterness and despair that you’ve been dragging around forever. If you’re going to carry living water, you have to put down the old water jar and move into new life when transforming grace is present.

Finally, Patricia de Jong reminds us, “Like the woman at the well, we have made some strange bedfellows in this life and we have taken some foolish and sometimes terrible missteps. Like her, we are accustomed to the literal words of religion, but we fail to connect them with the possibilities contained in the promise of real living water. But like the woman, we too can take the leap of faith from the water of Jacob’s well to the fountain of endless hope in the Gospel of love and reconciliation.”

Every day we have a choice: we can pick up the same old water jar and start the day dragging around the same old stuff, and at the end of the day, fade back into the darkness like Nicodemus, still looking for what will fill up the empty space in our hearts. Or, like the Samaritan woman, we can put the old water jar down and start the day carrying living water that will fill our souls with hope and forgiveness and love and trust. Only you can make that choice. But you have to come to the well, and you have to trade in the old, broken water jar for one that will carry living water. Amen.

⁴ Patricia de Jong, “The Cup of Our Life,” sermon preached at the First Congregational Church of Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, March 7, 1999.