

**Living Water**  
**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Mary Koon**  
**March 12, 2023**  
**John 4: 5–30, 39–42**

Today’s story from the gospel of John is about barrier crossings and bridge building, about quenching our thirst for God, and for what really matters.

Traveling with his disciples, Jesus leaves the Judean countryside and heads toward Galilee. I have heard that there are really only two-story plots - a person went on a journey, or a stranger came to town.

**John 4: 5–42**

...Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

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.)

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 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?’

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.’

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.’

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!’

The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Holy One in spirit and truth, for God seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’

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.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ They left the city and were on their way to him.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. 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.’

AMEN

There are two ways to get from Judea to Galilee. One takes you up the Jordan River Valley and is soft and flat. The other goes through Samaria, which is rocky and mountainous. Jesus chooses the road less traveled. Clearly, he was on a mission.

Jesus’ choice to go through Samaria would have shocked early listeners because the Jews and Samaritans were enemies. Samaritans held a common heritage with the Jews but were also different. They read different versions of the Torah and disagreed on the proper place to worship God. Samaritans felt that God was found on Mount Gerezin, and the Jewish people felt the proper place to worship was in the temple in Jerusalem.

So, first, Jesus is in Samaria – literally crossing a border – and then he talks with a Samaritan woman, and that was scandalous.

A Jewish man didn't speak with a woman in public, let alone initiate conversation. It's radical. It's risky. The Samaritan woman is seen as "other", "alien", an "ethnic outsider". But Jesus humbly approaches her as a fellow human being with a basic, human need for water.

He engages her as a person who is a spiritual seeker with a keen mind and gifts to share.

Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman is one of his longest conversations recorded in the gospels. And notably, Jesus' reveals his identity to this woman, something John doesn't note Jesus does with the disciples until the end of his earthly life.

We don't know why the woman arrives at the well at noon when the sun is high in the sky, it's hot and the well is deserted. Presumably, women would go to the well early in the day, or in the late afternoon, when it was cool, to gather water and to visit with friends. They might linger and socialize.

Maybe the woman felt uneasy around the other women or was ostracized by them. For whatever reason, she doesn't feel that she can be with the others. She wants to hide, to be invisible. I can well imagine the courage it must have taken this woman to sit and talk with Jesus, a stranger.

The meeting at the well follows the form that John uses throughout the gospel. There's an encounter with Jesus, a conversation, then misunderstanding on the part of the one with whom Jesus speaks, and then an invitation into deeper insights and choice about discipleship. Jesus' conversations operate on two levels, a literal one, and a spiritual one.

You recall that Nicodemus asks how someone old can be born again, "Do I climb back into my mother's womb?" And later, Jesus tells his disciples that he is the way, and they look for a road map.

So, at first the woman doesn't understand. Sir, where will you get this living water and how can you give it to me without a bucket and a rope? Then the light bulb goes on.

The well has water, H<sub>2</sub>O, the building block of life. Jesus has living water, the building block of faith.

John's gospel reminds us that there is always more at work in scripture, and in the world, than what we can see with just our eyes. God is always moving to bring us into more loving, caring insights, growing our compassion for self and others. Stretching the boundaries of our care and concern. Asking us to see with our minds and our hearts.

Jesus then goes right to the woman's heart. He accurately tells her that she has had five husbands and the man she is with now is not her husband. While this may raise our eyebrows, Jesus makes the statement without judgement. He doesn't embarrass her, shame her, or make her feel "less than." He brings her out of hiding and exposes her life to the light of his respect and love.

Jesus simply accepts her as she is, wounded, yes, and curious, gifted, beloved of God. We can only guess at why she has had the life she has, though we know that something in her situation made her want to be apart from others.

The woman at the well has popularly been described as fallen, loose, promiscuous even. A sinner. Yet there is no explicit evidence for this in the text.

In those days, women were acted upon, they had little agency. Maybe the woman married young and became a young widow, then passed along to her husband's brothers one after another in Levirate custom. Or maybe she was infertile or had a disability. Nowhere does Jesus condemn her or mention forgiveness for her "sin."

The writer Debie Thomas says, “Jesus’ willingness to break the social rules of his day means that we, his followers, must live into the truth that people are more than the sum of their political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. He invites us to look at the Samaritan woman and see a sister and an apostle, not a harlot, a heretic, a foreigner, or a threat.” (<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2561-the-woman-at-the-well-2>) An essential reminder in a highly polarized world.

After being seen and accepted, the woman recognizes Jesus as a prophet. Emboldened, she raises a question about a major theological question that divides the Jews and Samaritans, where the proper worship of God should take place. One day, Jesus says, blowing convention out of the water (so to speak), “Worship will not be confined to a physical location, but will take place in our hearts, our minds, our bodies, we will worship God in spirit and in truth.”

The Samaritan woman, excited by Jesus’ words, runs into the village, forgetting she is the outsider, the one who kept to herself. She knocks on peoples’ doors inviting them to come and see Jesus for themselves.

So excited was she, that she even forgets her water jar at the well. The woman who arrived at the well, drawn by thirst, leaves knowing she’d never be thirsty in the same way again.

Perhaps we can see the abandoned water jar as representative of those things we seek after to heal our hurts, to quench our thirst, our longing for wholeness. The things we need to leave behind in order to move forward. It can symbolize the multiple ways we run from the truth of our hurt and woundedness or try to numb it. With food, alcohol, shopping, social media or purposely ignoring it. Ways that tend to leave us feeling more disconnected, more thirsty. Ultimately, the only way to quench this kind of thirst is with living water.

St. Augustine says, famously, that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.

Friends, this unique and beautiful story can offer us a lens through which to look as we continue on our Lenten journey. It reminds us that God always meets us where we are and that there is no need to hide. There's really no need, for God knows us completely, loves and forgives us.

As we allow ourselves to be seen by God, as we drink of this living water, and feel it gushing up within us, we are free to recognize the Spirit in others. Living water flowing, we can begin to leave behind the things that mask our pain, our sense of inadequacy, and don't really bring healing. With humility, we can listen to ourselves, to God, and to others, and begin to break barriers and build bridges.

For what do you thirst this day?

AMEN