

Living Water from Jacob's Well

John 4:5-30, 39

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The Book of John is my favorite in all the Bible. The entire book is devoted to speak the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the Messiah, the one whose coming was foretold by the prophets. In John Chapter 17 we are privileged to listen in on the “conversation at the center of the universe”, where God the Son speaks in passionate and intimate prayer to God the Father the night before he was crucified. Jesus prays that those who believe in Him might have unity and oneness. He prays “Father, I pray that they may one as we are one, I in you and you in me and me in them, so that the world may believe that You sent Me”. John’s Gospel presents Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

And so, here in Chapter 4, our text for today, we find the story commonly known as the story of the ‘woman at the well’; a story about a wayward, sad, beaten down Samaritan woman who is engaged in conversation with the Messiah, the Creator God of the Universe in the flesh. Let’s set the stage for the reading of our Scripture.

The scene takes place in Palestine. It is only 120 miles north to south. It is bordered on the east by the Jordan River. But within that area were three divisions of territory: to the north was Galilee; to the south was Judaea; and in the middle was Samaria. Jesus had to go north from Judaea to Galilee. But rather than take the route that most Jews would take, Jesus went straight north through Samaria. Most Jews would totally avoid Samaria altogether. We’ll talk more about that in just a minute. They would go east to cross the Jordan then north and cross the Jordan again going west into Galilee, totally bypassing Samaria. But Scripture says that Jesus “had to pass through Samaria”. This trip was ordained. It was part of God’s plan. It was in God’s sovereignty that Jesus go through Samaria and meet this woman at the well. So, why would the Jews go to such time and trouble to bypass Samaria?

Hundreds of years earlier the Jews were conquered and taken in captivity to Babylon. Some of them remained behind. They intermarried with the Canaanites. They took parts of the Jewish religion and parts of the Canaanites religion and created a hybrid that looked nothing like Orthodox Judaism.

As a result there was a centuries old feud between Jews and Samaritans. Time does not permit a full examination of the reasons but the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans was characterized by extreme political controversy and a deep seeded religious conflict. The Jews and Samaritans disputed over proper sacrifices and competing temples. The Jews treated the Samaritans as Gentiles and discriminated against them at every opportunity. They considered Samaritans a ‘foolish people’ to be avoided and shunned. Historical evidence tells us that ‘hate crimes’ were committed against one another. In the eyes of the Jews, Samaritans were half-breeds. They were outcasts undeserving the many blessings of Israel. They were unclean.

Jesus was a Jew; the woman a Samaritan. Jesus ignored the barriers. In the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus dealing with this irrational and judgmental relationship as he tells the story of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10 and he then heals the Samaritan man in chapter 17. Here in John’s Gospel, we find Jesus doing something very un-Jewish as he travels directly through Samaria, certain to encounter numerous of these unclean heathens on the way to Galilee.

But that was the plan. He heads due north and, arriving at the well, does something totally unacceptable. He speaks to this Samaritan woman and asks her for a drink of water.

This story takes place at a well and it is not just any well, it is Jacob’s well. It is the well that Jacob had purchased many years before. It is where Jacob met Rachel. This is the well that Jacob dug for his family and his animals. On his deathbed, Jacob bequeathed the land to Joseph. When Joseph died in Egypt, his body was taken back to this land for burial. This area was home to many Jewish memories but the time of captivity and exile had changed the landscape. And here, according to God’s sovereignty, this was the perfect place, the perfect time and the perfect person to whom Jesus would reveal His true identity for the first time. The Samaritan woman is in the story but the story is all about Jesus.

So that’s the set up. Here is Jesus, a Jewish teacher, a rabbi taking the most direct route to Galilee, straight through the land of the hated Samaritans, and he engages a Samaritan woman in conversation as his disciples travel on to town to get supplies. We already know from our story last week about Nicodemus that engaging Christ in conversation can be life changing. Let’s see what happens.

This is a long passage but a great story. Hear the Word of the Lord.

John 4:5-30, 39

“A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?’ (For Jews have no dealings 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 nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.’”

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” 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 now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 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 worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people 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 (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.” Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you seek?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, “Come, and see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” They went to out of the town and were coming to him.”

Verse 39: “Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.....”

What a great story! We could go so many directions with this story. We could speak in greater depth about the conflict between the Samaritans and Jews. We could wade through the reasons for the heated disagreement as to the proper place to worship God. To dig deep into what Jesus meant by worshipping God “in spirit and in truth” could be a sermon series on its own. Think of it, to worship God in spirit (the Holy Spirit) and Truth (Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life) is to be drawn up into the very life of our Triune God. We could even talk about what that worship looks like. But this morning we are going to focus on the water.....the water so vital and necessary for life in Palestine and the living water that Christ gives, water to eternal life.

Did you know that this well still exists today? It is over 100 feet deep and without something with which to draw water, it would be impossible to have a drink. Jesus was tired and thirsty from his journey and had no way to get the water from the well. It was the middle of the day, in the heat of the day; high noon. For some reason this woman had come to the well by herself. The common practice would have been to go to the well with other women in the early morning or later in the cool of the early evening. Perhaps she was alone because this woman had a past, she was a social and moral outcast. She had had five husbands and was living with a man to whom she was not married. It would have been surprising to find anyone at the well at this time of day but when she arrives she finds a Jewish man... a Jewish teacher in fact, a Rabbi, the man Jesus Christ. Jesus reaches across almost every barrier we can create between ourselves as human beings: a racial barrier, a cultural barrier, a gender barrier, a political barrier, a religious barrier, and a moral barrier. That’s what Jesus does! He addresses the woman. He places himself at her mercy asking her for a drink of water.

From an ordinary Jewish religious leader, she probably would have fled. Had he spoken to her, she would have cowered in shame and silence. Strict Rabbis were forbidden from speaking to women in public, and certainly not a Samaritan woman. A strict Rabbi may not even speak to his wife or daughter or mother in public. In fact there were some who were called the “bruised and bleeding Rabbis” because they were the ones who would close their eyes if they saw a woman on the street and they’d keep walking into walls and houses.

Jesus did not sit in judgment. He conveyed a genuine interest in her and engaged her where she was- on her level. He did not speak down to her. He did not heap theology on her and he didn’t belittle her ignorance. He simply asked for a drink of water.

So the conversation begins and Jesus guides it graciously and masterfully from the simplicity of a drink of water to the transcendence of eternal life.

The woman said, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob?”

And Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Any well-read Jew with any spiritual insight into the Hebrew Scriptures would not have misunderstood Jesus’ words about living water. The Jews often spoke of the “thirst of the soul for God” and Scripture gives us over and over of the imagery of water and thirst and things eternal.

In the Book of Revelation we are told of “water without price” and “springs of living waters”. Isaiah the prophet said that God’s people would draw water from the “wells of salvation” and the Psalmist gave us the picture of “thirsting for the living God.”

“The thirsty should come to the waters and freely drink” says Isaiah and Jeremiah warns of those who had forsaken the God, those who would miss drinking “of the fountain of living waters.” Ezekiel had his vision of “the river of life” and Zechariah had visions of the “cleansing fountain” in the new earth. Jesus seized on the opportunity that his thirst and her cup presented.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness” Jesus tells us later.

Let’s park here. Let’s examine this living water. Let’s see if we can taste of it and be refreshed this morning. Have you ever been really, really thirsty? Our bodies on average are about 60% liquid. Dehydration can be excruciatingly painful and ultimately lead to death. Water is absolutely critical for humans to survive. Jesus uses this image. He speaks of Living Water, Water that will so quench a man’s thirst that he will never thirst again. But it is not physical thirst about which he speaks. It is a much, much greater thirst.

Timothy Keller, of Redeemer Church in New York, settles on this “living water” in this way:

“This metaphor of living water means even more than that. Jesus is not just telling us that what he has to offer is lifesaving- he is also revealing that it satisfies from the inside. He says, “My water, if you get it, will become in you a spring of water welling up into eternal life.” He is talking about deep soul satisfaction, about incredible satisfaction and contentment that doesn’t depend on what is happening outside of us.

So the question Jesus is really addressing is, what will make you happy? What will really give you a satisfying life? What will satisfy forever the deep longings of your soul? Almost always you will answer by thinking of something outside of you.”

Before I joined our church’s staff, I interviewed a lot of people in my years in university work and then the wireless industry: students with their studies ahead of them, young adults with their careers just beginning and still others who were headlong into their careers and climbing a ladder of success. One of the questions I always asked in these interviews was, “What would make you most happy and fulfilled?”

Timothy Keller is right. Almost always the answer was something outside of themselves. It was something tangible, material, relational or circumstantial.

Keller goes on to say, “But whatever it is that makes you say, “If I have that, if I get there, then I’ll know I’m important, then I’ll know I have significance, then I know I’ll have security. It is then that I will be happy”...it’s like something outside of you.”

But here Jesus says there is nothing outside of you that can truly satisfy the thirst that is deep down inside you...you don’t need water splashed in your face; you need water that comes from even deeper down inside you than the thirst itself.

Jesus is saying, “I can give it. I can put it into you. I can give you absolute, unfathomable satisfaction in the core of your being regardless of what happens on the outside, regardless of your circumstances.”

And you know what? All those things on the outside just get in the way of our hearing what Jesus is really talking about.

Once again, Timothy Keller, “Most are not able to recognize a thirsty soul for what it is. And as long as you think there is a pretty good chance that you will achieve some of your dreams, as long as you think you have a shot at success, you experience your inner emptiness as “drive” or “something missing on the outside”. You interpret your “anxiety” to be “hope”. And so you remain almost completely oblivious to how deep your thirst actually is. Most of us say to ourselves that the reason we remain unfulfilled is because we simply haven’t been able to achieve our goals or obtain things outside of us that we desire so much.”

We live almost our entire lives without admitting to ourselves the depth of our spiritual thirst. Everyone has got to live for something. Everyone worships something. Whatever that thing is, you tell yourself that you have to have it or there is no tomorrow. That means that if anything threatens it, you will become inordinately scared; if anyone blocks it, you will become inordinately angry; and if you fail to achieve it, you will never be able to forgive yourself.

And the fact is that the few who actually achieve all their dreams wind up still “hungering and thirsting” for more.

Jesus is arguing that if HE is not that thing in which you find your life giving nourishment, the things of life will fail you and you will literally, spiritually die of thirst.

Well this Samaritan woman does know at least some of the Jewish Scriptures. When Jesus said, “...the hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshippers, will worship the Father in spirit and truth for the Father is seeking such people to worship him”, the woman replied “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called the Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.”

She knew there was more. In spite of her five husbands, even while living with a man to whom she was not married and ostracized by the women of the village, she hungered for more. Even while lonely in relationship and purposeless in her living, this woman thirsted after something greater, something transcendent to the life she had experienced. She looked to the day when one would come who would have all the answers, one who would give her meaning, and purpose, and joy. One who would quench her thirst. She longed for the Messiah.

Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

Upon hearing those words, the woman left her water jar and dashed off to town to tell others what she has heard. She cannot contain her excitement! “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ, the Messiah?”

And Scripture tells us that many Samaritans went out to see Jesus and believed on him because of this woman’s testimony.

We have heard this woman’s testimony this morning.

Jesus is no respecter of persons. He does not care how old or young you are. He removes all the barriers that stand between you and our Holy God. He has come to quench the thirst of our souls.

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Matthew 11:29

Come and drink from the Living Water offered by our Living Lord and never thirst again. AMEN!