

A Woman By a Well

John 4

Meeting Jesus of Nazareth / The Gospel of John

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

In this story of a woman at a well, we meet an unnamed woman with a great need, a good mind, and a sincere heart. When she meets Jesus, her need is met, her mind becomes satisfied and her heart embraces the Messiah. She certainly was not looking for him. Is it possible to meet Jesus when you're not looking for him? Let us pray. Lord, speak to us through your word. By the power of your Holy Spirit, quiet all voices in us but your own. Give us a sense of anticipation that you will meet us and a willingness to respond to what you say to us. We pray this in the name of the Living Word, even Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus has learned that the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews, are keeping track of the relative popularity of Jesus and John the Baptist. The word on the street is that Jesus is climbing in the polls. He needs to get away for a while so he heads north from Judea to Galilee. This means that he will go through Samaria.

Samaria wasn't the most popular place for devout Jews – there was a long history of tension, even hatred, between Jews and Samaritans. Very strict Jews would not go through the region. If they could have, they would have built a Samaritan Beltway in order to avoid the ritual uncleanness that would come from encountering Samaritans. Strict Pharisees had an uncomplicated system for being holy – they simply kept their distance from anything unclean.¹ “If I'm nowhere near it, it can't contaminate me.” What was the source of hostility between these two people?

Like most hostilities – it went back a long way and it involved long memories. You know that after King Solomon, the Kingdom of Israel split into two nations – Judah (southern Israel) and Israel (the northern tribes). Both kingdoms slid into idolatry and patterns of sinfulness, which brought on God's judgment at the hands of invading nations. Northern Israel was the first kingdom to be conquered. The Assyrians came in and took away the best and brightest, assimilating them into Assyrian culture. The Assyrians let the poor stay in their own land, but left an occupying force. As time went on, the Jews of Israel married Assyrians, creating a new people – not fully Gentile, not fully Jewish. As a result, very little of their Jewish heritage was maintained. They only accepted the first five books of the Bible, rejecting the prophetic writings. In fact, if they didn't like what even those five books said, they would change them to fit what they wanted. And, since Jerusalem was in the southern kingdom, they declared a new place of worship for God – Mount Gerizim.

Then, the Babylonians conquered Judah. Their experience was a little different. The Babylonians carried them off but let them keep their culture and religion intact. Their exile caused them to weep for what they had lost and when they returned seventy years later, they were bound and determined to be faithful and pure, in their lives and in their worship in Jerusalem.

You can see, can't you, that not only are these two groups different, but that prejudices and hatreds would keep them apart? For a Jew to have contact with a Samaritan would compromise all that he held dear. It might be the first step down that road that got them into trouble in the first place. Just steer clear of them and things will be okay.

So, we read of Jesus (in verse 4): But he had to go through Samaria. That's an odd way to put it. He had to? If he was the great prophet and spiritual leader that the beginning of the story leads us to believe, shouldn't he have avoided it altogether? Maybe there was some urgent matter of ministry that wouldn't allow him the time to go around. He had to get someplace and get there fast? Well, no.

When John says that Jesus had to go through Samaria, he meant that it was necessary in order to fulfill a divine purpose. Jesus didn't have to get someplace in a hurry. Jesus had to meet this woman – she was the entire purpose of his itinerary. He came to Samaria just for her and for all her Samaritan neighbors. Jesus was not going to avoid the sin of Samaria – he was going to wash it away. And this woman was the key. When she got up that morning she had no idea that everything in her life would be brought out into the open. In fact, the more hidden her life was, the better. That's why she went to the well in the heat of the noonday. It was a time when few people went. She could get her water and go home without being bothered by gossip or harassment.

We know from the story that she had had five husbands and that the man she was living with now was not her husband. We need to understand that in this culture, a woman could rarely and with very great difficulty divorce her husband. This woman had been 'put away' five times. Think of how she felt – unwanted, passed around, insecure. Not even Samaritan women wanted to be with her. The story is saying in so many words, if the Samaritans don't want anything to do with you, you are at the bottom of the heap. A phrase comes to mind from the time I asked a tartan specialist to find my Scottish clan affiliation. His exact words to me were “You're lower than pond scum, luv.” That's this woman – lower than pond scum.

When she got up that morning, she didn't realize that her life and the life of her community would be transformed because a Jewish prophet just had to come there. She had no idea that a man, a Jewish man would treat her with respect and grace. So, just exactly how does her day unfold? She takes her pitcher and heads out to the well, where a tired and thirsty Jewish man asks her for a drink of water. Given her past and the political, religious and cultural tensions, you can understand why she questions him. “Why would you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?” Jesus doesn't answer that question directly. Instead he tells her that if she knew what God wanted to give her and to whom she was talking, she would be the one asking for water and that he would give her living water. She comes right back, noticing that he has absolutely nothing to draw water with. “How are you going to do that?”

Not only that, she's heard the phrase living water before. Living water was water from a moving stream or fountain. It wasn't still and stagnant. Living water was cleaner and fresher and anyone would prefer living water to the still water of the average well. What strikes her is that Jesus seems to be saying that the water he will give her is better than the water she can get from Jacob's well. In her mind, what she has is the best she can get – unless Jesus is greater than Jacob. So she asks him if he is.

Jesus answers by telling her that his living water is eternal. If you drink his water, you'll never have to drink again. You'll never have to come out to this well again. This gets her attention. She realizes that Jesus is speaking of something more than fresh, flowing streams. Let's face, whether you go to the well or the fountain, you always have to come back. Still or sparkling, the water runs out. You get thirsty.

This is something she really wants, but she still doesn't grasp the spiritual significance of what Jesus is offering. In some way, she thinks Jesus is offering her magic water. She could use some of that...anything that will keep her from having to come back to the well alone...to the place that reminds her that she really doesn't belong anywhere. Oh, if she could only have something that would take away the consequences of her bad decisions. If she could only drink something that would take away the pain of all that has been done to her. That would be greater than anything Jacob's well ever gave her.

Now it seems that Jesus changes the subject, but he's not. He knows what her deepest hurts and sins are. She wants to keep them hidden – it just seems better that way. But Jesus knows better. They must be brought out into the open if they are to be washed away, so he asks her to go get her husband. She tells a bit of the truth – that she has no husband. Jesus affirms her for that truth-telling. That's what we do in worship every Sunday – we give you that opportunity to tell Jesus the truth about what's going on in your life. And that time of confession and assurance of pardon is meant to have the same effect for you that it did for this woman.

Jesus goes on to tell her that he knows it all...he knows it all. And he's known it all along. That's why he came to Samaria. She is overwhelmed and then begins to ask about the religious differences between Jews and Samaritans. This is most frequently portrayed as her attempt to change the subject because Jesus has gotten uncomfortably close. Maybe. I think, however, that there might be a different explanation.

This conversation is very coherent. On the surface it seems to jump around, but it is very logical. This woman gets closer to Jesus with every turn in the conversation. She is thinking seriously about what he is saying. She is not trying to deflect anything at this moment. Think about it. Jesus, with an abundance of grace, has just revealed her sin and she agrees with him that this is so. This is the essence of true confession – to agree with what God already knows about us.

She's not ready to run away. At this point she wants to do something about it. She has moved into the spiritual realm, but all she really knows is 'religion.' Jesus honors her by answering her question about worship. He tells her that one is not free to worship just anywhere and anyway one pleases. He goes on to say that the Jews, in fact, will be the source of salvation. She wants that salvation – this is her deepest need, her biggest thirst. So she asks about the Messiah. She says that she knows that when the Messiah comes he will tell us all things. In fact, that's exactly what Jesus had just done.

It's at that moment that Jesus says the words that turn her world upside down – "I am he – the one who is speaking to you." In Greek, Jesus says *ego eimi*. I AM. This is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew construction for God – YHWH. Remember when God told Moses to go back to Egypt to lead the people out of bondage? Moses asked, "who shall I say sent me?" And God replied, "Tell them I AM who I AM has sent you." The God who sends Moses to a people who thought that they had been forgotten in their misery is the same God, who in Jesus Christ had to go to Samaria. He had to go to them, for they certainly would not come to him.

"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is speaking to you, you would have asked and he would give you living water." Now she knows the gift of God. Now she knows who is speaking to her. She runs off to the village – to the ones she has avoided. She can hardly contain herself as she shares the good news: "You know what, I think the Messiah is here! Come and see!" And they did.

When this woman got up that morning she expected her day to be like every other day, but when she got to the well, she saw a thirsty man. She questioned the thirsty man and saw a Jew, whom she challenged. Then she saw a Rabbi and learned from him. But the Rabbi became the prophet who swept her off her feet and that prophet became the Christ whom she adored.² When you got up this morning what did you expect?

1 Bob Dillenbaugh, "Woman at the Well," http://bible.org/print_page.php?page_id=2357, accessed 7 March 2009.

2 Adapted from Word Biblical Commentary: John, Volume 26, by George Beasley-Murray, Word Books, 1987, p. 66.