

In just a few verses, John sets the scene – at a well in Samaria – and the potential controversy – Jesus stopping at that well in Samaria. Jesus is heading back to Galilee from Judea. While he took the most direct route, many Jews chose longer, alternatives routes so they could avoid the bad part of town – or more precisely, encountering the bad people of the region – or even more precisely, running into those Samaritans! Jesus chose to go through Samaria.

Jesus and his disciples arrive at a well at the edge of a town. It is noon and likely hot. There is no one at the well, because the townswomen, who draw and haul water for their families, do so in the cooler morning hours. We learn the disciples go into the town to buy food for lunch, leaving Jesus alone at the well.

Enter a woman with a water jar, also alone. Cultural mores were such that men and women should not be alone, one on one, even in public, much less talk. The drama is enhanced because she is a Samaritan woman. We will hear John, the master of parentheses, remind us Jews and Samaritans had a history of not associating with each other. Over the centuries, their histories, cultures, and traditions diverged. Samaritans worshiped differently on Mount Gerizim, while Jews worshiped in Jerusalem. Animosity, even hatred are terms used to describe the relationship between Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus is thirsty. He has no bucket and the well is deep. There stands a woman with a bucket. Will they speak? Yes, they will, and it turns out to be the longest recorded dialogue Jesus has with anyone – and did I mention she was a Samaritan and a woman? Let us hear the first part of our lesson in John 4:

Narrator: *Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee.<sup>4</sup> But he had to go through Samaria.<sup>5</sup> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.<sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well.<sup>8</sup> (Jesus' disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)<sup>9</sup> It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus started the conversation with her.*

Jesus: *'Give me a drink.'*

Samaritan Woman: *'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'*

Narrator: *(Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)*

Jesus: *'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.'*

Samaritan Woman: *'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?'*

Jesus: *'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>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.'*

Samaritan Woman: *'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'*

At first, it seems to be all about the water. Jesus needs a drink to quench his thirst. The woman is interested in not having to return again to the well to draw water, for a reason that seems to be more than just the inconvenience and burden of hauling water each day. We don't know if Jesus ever received water from the woman, but he was willing to drink from her Samaritan vessel. That is important to note.

As with the Samaritans and Jews of the first century, throughout history, peoples and nations have learned to hate or fear those we do not know, other than from biased reports we read, watch, or hear. We refer these others as "them" or "those people;" those we call the "other" because of their nation, race or faith. We learn to keep boundaries between us, whether with walls or gated communities or security systems, which protect us from having to encounter them, much less speak with them, and learn their names, and meet their families, hand ear their fears, and learn we all have empty water jars to fill.

Jesus the Jew, treats the unnamed Samaritan woman with a respect that was not expected, and might even be regarded as suspicious. As we are about to hear, his conversation with a woman will be questioned, albeit silently, even by his disciples. The disciples recognize it would be safer to keep Jesus within the lines, within the boundaries, within the confines of Judaism, the familiarity of "us." But, John wrote that Jesus had to go to Samaria, where he will find the respect he accords the woman is mutual. He then moves the conversation beyond the water, but first a word about the woman.

Even though the text offers no biblical evidence of it being true, history has placed this woman on the cover of tabloid magazines. She has been marked as sinful, even a prostitute; perhaps it is because we seem to revel in rumor and innuendo, and planted suspicions we expect others to believe.

Certainly there are whispers of why she comes alone to the well in the heat of the day. Yes, perhaps the other women have scorned her, and yes, it may be because she has had five husbands as Jesus is about to reveal. Yet, we also know men could simply divorce a woman on a whim in those times. And if she is so sinful, it is curious that all the people of her town are about to readily believe what she tells them about Jesus.

I encourage you to set aside past prisms through which you have viewed the Samaritan woman, for there is no hint of judgment as Jesus continues his conversation with her. What we discover is that Jesus by telling the woman everything she has ever done, Jesus is revealing to the woman who he is.

Narrator: The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman continues.

Jesus: *'Go, call your husband, and come back.'*

Samaritan Woman: *'I have no husband.'*

Jesus: *'You are right in saying, "I have no husband";<sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'*

Samaritan Woman: *'Sir, I see that you are a prophet.<sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you<sup>\*</sup> say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'*

Jesus: *'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'*

Samaritan Woman: *'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'*

Jesus: *'I am he, \* the one who is speaking to you.'*

Narrator: *Just then Jesus' 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?' <sup>28</sup>Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,*

Samaritan Woman: *'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, \* can he?'*

Narrator: *The Samaritans in Sychar left the city and were on their way to him. ...Many Samaritans believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' <sup>40</sup>So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. <sup>41</sup>And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup>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.'*

This is a story about a well, and water. People come to a well when they are thirsty, when they need water to drink. While some of our homes might still have well water, it is now delivered through faucets, and instead of carrying a bucket, we slip a glass beneath the clean, running stream. That said, I recognize sales of bottled water has now surpassed sales of soft drinks, and many people retrieve filtered water from their refrigerator door instead of the sink. This is a story about a well, and water.

Jesus stops at a well, with the same physical thirst as the Samaritan woman who brings her empty water jar. The well is not his peoples' well; it is her peoples' well. For Jesus, it is the well of a foreign land, into which he has intentionally traveled. He has brought his disciples, making them also walk where "those people" live, and where they will drink their water, and eat their food.

Jesus recognizes the woman has brought both a water jar thirst and another thirst. Jacob's well will take care of her water jar thirst, and his own, but only for a time, and then the water jar will need to be refilled. Jesus does not remove the water jar thirsts we have, our need for water to keep us alive.

The woman has another thirst, and I imagine Jesus sees her carrying a second container. This container is not for water. We might think of it as being like that bucket of which she speaks to Jesus, which she drops into the many wells of her culture to gather things that promise to bring her happiness and well-being, security and self-esteem, purpose and meaning. She would like to fill this unseen bucket with a full family life, without the fracture of divorce with which she now deals. Perhaps she dreams of becoming wealthy enough to hire someone to haul water from the well to her home. She may fill the bucket with a new hairstyle, or even a discrete tattoo that is uniquely her. Perhaps she will find some new furniture or buy a new car to solve a mid-life crisis, or simply purchase the latest tech device or new wallpaper television, or take the trip, or indulge in something she has always desired, but does not need. She carries all these things in the other bucket only Jesus sees, hoping they will fulfill their promises to bring her happiness and well-being, security and self-esteem, purpose and meaning.

We realize while the story is at first of a woman at the well, the whole town came out to Jesus as well – men and women. I imagine each of them also bringing along a bucket filled with the stuff of their culture that has promised to bring them happiness and well-being, security and self-esteem, purpose and meaning. It does not take a keen eye to notice each of those buckets is leaking. What has been placed within it will not last for long, and their thirst for happiness and well-being, security and self-esteem, purpose and meaning, will return. I expect each of them know it, and the woman's words have given them hope, so they go to the well to see Jesus and receive living water.

The townsfolk believed the woman, hear Jesus themselves, and invite him to stay – in their land, their foreign land, the land of “those people”, in the houses of “those Samaritans who worship in the wrong place and way.” The disciples are learning political and national borders are not God's borders, as Jesus leads them into town, to stay with those “others” for two days.

My sermon title, “It Must Be the Water” is a phrase we hear in different contexts. I recall backpacking during college years, when we followed the rule we could drink mountain stream water if it was free flowing over ten feet. We were either lucky, or since the waterborne parasite giardia can wait two weeks to attack, perhaps we never put together that it must have been the water.

If a certain family has an unusual number of geniuses, we may say, it must be the water. If a town produces many great athletes, we may say, it must be the water. It is a way of suggesting something is going on, but we don't really know what.

The woman at the well begins to unravel one water mystery. She tells Jesus, standing before her without a bucket, he will be unable to retrieve his living water because the well is deep. Symbolically, I thought how we sometimes prefer shallow wells because we prefer not to share our deep stories. Yet, even without a bucket, Jesus can reach deep within us, and reveal everything we have ever done. The good news is, even after he knows everything we have ever done, Jesus is still talking with us.

I find many turning points in this story – Jesus' decision to enter Samaria, the woman calling Jesus a prophet for his knowledge of her, the townspeople believing the woman's testimony. Yet, there is a turning point we can easily miss. *Then the woman left her water-jar ... and went back to the city.*

She left her water jar, and when she did, she set a challenge before her people, and us. The Samaritan woman found the living water, in a well that will not go dry. That well is still there, available for all who dare leave behind their water jars and empty out their leaking buckets of unfulfilled promises.

The woman is going to need that water jar, for water tomorrow or the next day, but today, this afternoon, she leaves it behind, because she has found another source for life, what a man who told her he is the Messiah called living water, which allowed her to gladly empty out all those leaking buckets of false claims of culture and nation, religion and economy, which promised for happiness and well-being, security and self-esteem, purpose and meaning.

Will the woman return to the well for water? Again, I am certain she will. She needs water to live and she will retrieve it for her family in her large stone water jar. Yet, she will now carry that water jar remembering that afternoon she left her jar behind, for she had met a God willing to cross human boundaries of faith and culture, to visit her well, and talk with her, and listen to her, and respect and love her with no word of judgment, and then also welcomed her people. It was in that encounter, she had her first sip of living water.