

# LIVING WATER

Through a conversation Jesus reveals his identity to a Samaritan woman

Scripture: John 4:5-42

In some ways today's story of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman is a mirror-image of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus which we considered last week. Nicodemus is named; he's a man, a Jew, respected by his peers. In contrast to that, the Samaritan woman is unnamed, a female, a Samaritan, shamed by her peers. Set side by side, these two stories invite us to join the conversation: Do we see who Jesus is? Are we willing to accept the gifts he offers?

The gospel of John is filled with clever word plays. Last week we discussed *born again/born from above* and the overlapping nuances of *wind/Spirit/breath*. This week's story is no different and in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we will again be amused by the ways they talk past each other.

The words with double meaning begin in verse 4. Jesus met with Nicodemus in Jerusalem, but now he is leaving Judea and returning to Galilee.

John writes, "But he had to go through Samaria."

It's that "had to" that's interesting. Geographically speaking, it's true. Galilee is north of Judea and to get there, travellers had to pass through Samaria. The trouble is, no self-respecting Jew would do this. Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans: they saw them as ritually unclean half-breeds and the accepted route north was to abruptly jog east, then north and finally west in order to avoid any contact with the Samaritans.

All of which turns that simple statement, "But he had to go through Samaria" into a red flag. There is more going on here than a journey north. It turns out that when Jesus said, "God so loved the world", that world included the Samaritans. Enemy or friend, heretic or faithful: God's love continues to surprise us with its breadth.

Jesus deliberately enters Samaria.

Jesus comes to the town of Sychar in Samaria. It is hot and he is tired. He sits down by the well and asks a Samaritan woman to give him a drink of water.

And so the conversation begins.

Jesus asks, "Will you give me a drink?" which to our ears is reasonable. It's the middle of the day. Jesus is hot and tired, and hospitality is usually freely offered and received. But to a 1<sup>st</sup> century Samaritan woman Jesus' request is astounding. In that one sentence, Jesus is crossing all sorts of barriers. He is a Jew speaking to a Samaritan. He is a man speaking to a woman. She is so stunned that his need of hospitality is forgotten. She has structured her life around conventions and traditions that Jesus has ignored. She can only protest, "How? How is it that you a Jew, ask a drink of me?"

But in asking "how?" that nameless woman has shifted the conversation to a somewhat deeper level. Already this conversation has moved from a simple request for water to a question of identity: Jewish identity vs

Samaritan identity, male identity vs female identity. Jesus follows the woman's lead and shifts the conversation to his own identity: if you knew who was asking you for water, you would have asked him for living water.

This conversation is pushing each of us to ask the same question, "Who is Jesus?" If, like that woman, we can see who Jesus is, then we too can ask for living water.

*Living water* is another one of those words with double meaning. On the one hand, it can mean fresh, running water that comes from a spring rather than water that is collected in wells or cisterns. But living water can also mean water that is brimming with life. This conversation is breaking open into possibilities: "gift of God" "living water" – there is a lot offered to her.

And that's just it. Jesus doesn't say, "I am the gift of God" but rather "*if you knew* the gift of God." The Samaritan woman must listen to Jesus and make some decisions. With whom is she speaking?

Jesus is offering her rich possibilities for a changed life, a transformed life but they are not yet talking on the same level. She asks Jesus, "How can you draw water without a bucket?"

There's a certain irony in her question. She thinks she is asking about drawing water from a well but if she knew where Jesus got his living water, if she knew who sent Jesus to the world, then she'd know who Jesus was.

The woman gets a little testy. After all, this well was not just any old well. It was Jacob's well and both Jews and Samaritans honoured Jacob. Did Jesus really think he was better than Jacob?

Jesus doesn't take offense. He simply compares Jacob's water to his living water. Will she choose the old water that doesn't quench thirst or will she choose the living water which quenches thirst and "gushes up to eternal life"?

Like Nicodemus, this Samaritan woman is offered the gift of new life, streams of living water that will never run dry. Jesus is offering to her the unending presence of God.

Her answer shows her confusion – yes, give me that water so that I don't have to come back to this well to draw water.

It's an amazing conversation, one that God would have with each of us, conversations that would enable us to see God more clearly, to take in what God is doing in Jesus and how we might drink in those living waters. So wherever you are in your life with God this morning, don't stop asking God questions. That woman at the well is full of questions, thoughtful questions, questions that matter and lead Jesus to reveal to her who he really is. God wants us to ask questions because questions that are asked so that we might understand, strengthen relationship. Make some time to ask God the honest questions that matter to you.

You can expect your conversations with God to take a long time. There'll be things you don't understand but that's okay. One thing the length of today's reading demonstrates is that God is willing to hang in there, to keep on listening, to keep on showing us God's heart until we can see the abundant love that it holds.

And when you talk with God, expect to be surprised, expect God to reveal something about God's self that you have never seen before.

Jesus has offered the Samaritan woman living water and now the conversation takes yet another turn.

Why do you think that woman was there at the well, alone, at noontime? Most people at that time, drew their water either first thing or last thing in the day. Who would choose to work in the hottest part of the day? And gathering water was a time for fellowship, for friendly gossip around the office water cooler. And yet, there she is, alone.

Clearly she is somewhat ostracized from the rest of the village.

There has been a tendency to explain her isolation by her sinfulness. When it's revealed that she has had five husbands and is now living with someone who is not her husband, it's been assumed that she is a "loose" woman with a "shady past." The text does not support this.

It is interesting that neither Jesus nor John judges her character. There is no attempt to make her face her sinfulness and absolutely no mention of confession or repentance. Given the vulnerable position of women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, especially the ease with which husbands could divorce their wives while wives could not divorce their husbands, there are better explanations for her loneliness than her supposed bad behaviour. Her situation is more tragic than sinful.

But the real focus of the conversation is not on the woman's character but on Jesus' knowledge of her and when Jesus reveals that he knows her circumstance, she recognizes that he is a prophet. Immediately she asked this authority on religious matters the great question dividing Jews and Samaritans: where should they worship God? She has taken one step closer to identifying Jesus.

Jesus responds with a word of promise. You worship here and we worship in Jerusalem but the time is coming and is now here when all that will be unimportant for God will not be confined by ethnicity or place. True worshippers will worship in Spirit and in truth. The relationship between God and worshippers is what matters in the new age that is coming.

And she says, "I know it's coming" and Jesus says, "It is here!"

Jesus says, "I am," as in I am the God who spoke to Moses. I am the one in whom the presence of God can be found.

Jesus has never spoken so boldly, so directly about his identity before. And we are not told how the woman responds, not yet.

The disciples return and the conversation ends. She goes back to the village.

There is only that tantalizing picture of her water jug left behind.

The disciples heard God's call and left their nets.

The Samaritan woman has heard God's call and leaves her water jug.

We hear God's call – and what do we leave behind?

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