

John’s story of the women at the well is one of the longest and most satisfying stories of an encounter with Jesus in the New Testament. Here it comes:

John 4:1-29 (New Revised Standard Version):

Jesus and the Woman of Samaria

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John’— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he 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 the Father 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 Father in spirit and truth, for the Father 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?’

May we each discover the Messiah, in our own way and time. Amen.

This is such a great story, I am going to take three runs at it, each run from a different perspective.

First, the traditional perspective. Here’s the one sentence summary: Jesus transcends cultural conventions and reveals himself as the Messiah. The Samaritan woman was an unusual person for Jesus to engage so deeply. She had three strikes going against her:

1. First, she was a *woman*. Men wouldn’t go out of their way to speak to women.
2. Second, she was a *Samaritan*. While Samaritans also read from the Torah and worshiped the same god as the Jews, Jews did not consider their observances, their practices of *faith*, to be authentic.
3. Third, she is a social *outcast*. Did you notice the dialog about her five “husbands?” In addition, Jesus says that she is living with a man right *now* who is not her husband. The word translated as “husband” can just as correctly be translated as “man”, the inference being, using more contemporary language, that she has “shacked up” or had intimate relationships with several men, which made her a social outcast.

How do we know she is a social outcast? She is out collecting water for her household at noon, near the hottest time of day. Why? Because the rest of the women, the “proper” women normally collected water in the early morning.

Because they despised her, she had to wait and go out later, alone, without the companionship of other women. Hers would have been a lonely, isolated existence, not unlike that of a leper. Yet, transcending cultural expectations is what Jesus is all about.

Jesus offers the woman at the well something far more important than a liquid with which to cook, clean, and bathe – he offers her deep, intimate connection with the wholeness of God; true eternal life in the present. In other words, full immersion in the presence of God, *in* community. That, in fact, is what our focus on silence and contemplation is all about – intimate connection with God in silence. This then, is the traditional interpretation.

Here's my second run at this story: Jesus meets his match at the well in a woman, a woman whose knowledge is as extensive and whose faith is as deep as his. When Jesus says, “woman, give me a drink”, she says to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep.’ In other words, how do you expect me to get you a drink when you showed up totally unprepared? Where's your bucket? Where's your rope to lower it into the water?

If that wasn't enough, she asks, “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” She knows the Torah, the story of how their ancient ancestor Jacob acquired land, including this well. She knows the entire history of important events that took place at wells over Jewish history:

- God revealed a well to Hagar, just as she and her son, Ishmael, who had been cruelly exiled to die the desert by Abraham and Sarah.
- Isaac's servant encountered Rebekah at a well and took her home to Isaac to become his wife.

Thus, the woman knew that wells were not only life-saving places, but are symbols of God's salvation and desire for abundance for all people. So her challenge to him was, just who do you think you are, in the context of the enormous history of God's people? She also tests his understanding of where God should be worshipped, on Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans worshipped, or in Jerusalem. If he really knows the Torah, he *ought* to know the answer.

I believe that, on her own accord, without the presence of Jesus, the Samaritan woman knew of the lived experience of being in touch with the divine. How do we know this?

Because she brought her own lived experience of the presence of God to Jesus. She connected with and through him to God, but the point is, she already had her own direct connection – just like many of you have your own direct connection to the holy. Finally, this nameless Samaritan woman is the first person in *John's* gospel who identifies Jesus as the Messiah. She becomes the first evangelist, as she abandons her water jar, and takes her compelling story of an encounter with Jesus into the city.

What does this story tell us today, while we practice good hygiene and social distancing?

We are all interconnected through the presence of a living, loving God. Today Jesus encourages us to be people that welcome others across borders of countries and boundaries of ethnicity, boundaries of economic class, political parties, different understandings of identify and intimacy, and especially today, boundaries of Covid-19 status. As we are seeing, all people in the world are deeply connected. Disease disrespects any divisions we may try to create, not only among people, but with other species as well.

How will we continue to be the beloved community when, for safety reasons, we don't get together for Sunday worship? In both our traditional worship services and our contemplative gatherings, what people value the most is being together, with both long-time and brand new friends, whether we are singing, praying or opening ourselves to the presence of God alongside others. In new member ceremonies, new members often say, "we no longer go to church, we are the church." Being in *church*, in the same place as people we care for deeply is central to being the Body of Christ, but it is not the only or even the most important way we stay connected. Holding each other, our elected officials, first line responders, and all God's people in prayer is the most important.

We will use a variety of ways to stay together. As someone who has to rely upon text messages to stay in touch with his sons, I know how limited text and email communications can be. There is nothing like a phone call with people I love. Please plan to dramatically increase the number of phone calls you make to family and church members. Phone calls offer real conversation and dialog. They allow us to share context, emotions, and, most of all, love. The Deacons and I plan to use phone calls to help us stay connected.

How many of you like to receive cards and letters? I certainly do! Given that many forms of entertainment, including almost all sporting events have been put on hold, use some of that precious time to write cards and letters.

How will we stay connected to the living water of Christ? Once the rain stops, one of the gifts of enforced social distancing will be more opportunities to discover the beauty of God's creation in nature and in our gardens. In the words of Somerset Maugham: "Beauty is an ecstasy; it is as simple as hunger. There is really nothing to be said about it. It is like the perfume of a rose: you can smell it and that is all."

Let's use this time not to focus on fear but to savor our relationships with family, friends, and especially, God. Let us drink deeply of the spring of water gushing up to eternal life and share it in as many ways with as many people as we can. Amen.