

March 12th, 2023 • Third Sunday of Lent • In-Person and Online Worship

“Seeking: Living Water”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



John 4:5-30

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 worshiped 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 worshipers 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?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

After all the rain and snow we've had this season, I know that no one wants to hear about water this morning. But as a preacher and as the community of faith, whether we like it or not, today we are gifted and confronted with one of the most beautiful and transforming stories about water in the Bible. It's the story of a woman with the water Jesus needs to save him from dying of thirst. And it's the story of the water he has to save her from the living death of rejection and sin. The sharing of these waters brings reconciliation and healing. So let's continue to seek, through the power of this story, for deeper meaning and new life. *Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith.*

Do you know that the dialogue between Jesus and this woman is the longest conversation anywhere in the whole Bible? Glenda only read about half of their conversation. The whole story is twice as long as Jesus' exchange with Nicodemus. That's how important the message of this story was to the writer of this gospel. In John's Gospel, this woman who is given no name, this woman is the first person to engage in a serious theological discussion with Jesus and the first to acknowledge him as the Christ. A woman. A Samaritan. Jesus talks with her. Jesus takes her seriously. Jesus drinks from her ritually unclean Samaritan bucket. How amazing is that?!

In last week's story, we remember, Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night to learn about being born of water and the Spirit. Today, we develop that theme further, but the situation could hardly be more different. Jesus and the woman at the well. Instead of being questioned by a leader of the Jews, a learned Pharisee, Jesus is here confronted by a marginal, unnamed woman of, shall we say?, questionable character. Not only that, this woman was not a Jew but a Samaritan, once kissing cousins now long estranged and alienated. Rather than occurring under cover of darkness, this exchange takes place in the glaring light of the burning noonday sun. And unlike Nicodemus who sought Jesus out, there is no apparent

intentionality in today's encounter. It seems at first that the two just seem to run into each other. There they are, out in the middle of the desert. There are no crowds around this time, no disciples; just two at-risk people at an ancient watering hole. Jesus and the woman at the well.

John goes to great lengths to set up a powerful dynamic tension between Jesus and this Samaritan woman. The disciples have gone off to buy food, leaving Jesus alone in a dry land. He could have died of thirst. Those of us who have indoor running water in multiple rooms of our homes can easily overlook the value of a well in an ancient desert land. Jesus finds a well all right, but then has no cup or bucket with which to draw water and drink. I'm sure all you former Scouts out there are rolling your eyes about now at his thoughtless and dangerous behavior. "Be prepared" does not seem to have been Jesus' motto!

But he's in luck. Again, it seems, God's angels are out there in the wilderness ministering to him. Lo and behold, there is someone already there at the well who can assist him—but it turns out to be just about the last person on earth Jesus might want to encounter there. It's a woman, at a time when Jewish rabbis were not to engage women in conversation. Period. And not only that, but this is a divorced woman. A woman with a shady past some said.

That's the only way to explain what she was doing out there that day all alone. Women usually went to the well in small groups in the cool of the morning. They went together, friends, neighbors, family. Then as now it was dangerous to be in the desert all alone. The fact that this woman is out there alone at the hottest time of the day tells us that she had no friends, no family, that even her own people had rejected her. This woman needed living water, the water of love, the water of life.

But, there's another problem, another barrier between these two. She was a Samaritan. The enemy. Ritually unclean. At that time, Jews would have avoided traveling through Samaria but would have instead taken the extra nine hours to go around. And yet, Jesus seems to have told his disciples to journey right into enemy territory, in order to be in the place he needed to be that day. Indeed, God moves in mysterious ways...

So what happens between these two is truly astonishing. Nothing short of miraculous. These two strangers, these two enemies, these two whose worlds should never have connected—these two discover that they need each other.

Jesus seems to know everything about the woman's life. He speaks truth to her, and in that honesty and grace offers her living water. She so needed the fresh, living water only he could provide, to find healing and wholeness and a whole new life. And Jesus needed fresh water to drink to stay alive, water she could draw from the well in her bucket. At the well, we see that the Jewish Jesus and the Samaritan woman need each other to live. At the well, these two enemies connect in order for life to continue. At the well, these two discover how new life can spring forth.

The hope that is found in reconciling the differences that divide us from one another in this world, indeed from our own deepest humanity, is a powerful and life-giving message for our time. We know that we can live for awhile without water, but not for long. We know that we can live for awhile without love, but not for long. We know that the world can exist for awhile with people boxed into various opposing camps, but not for long. Without water, without love, without mutual respect and relationship, without reconciliation, we will die. Christ calls us to new life. Christ offers us the living waters that flow from the grace of God.

One of the beautiful things about this story comes in the realization that it's a story about two seekers—the woman at the well and Jesus himself. One seeking water to quench literal thirst. One seeking the water of life to find healing and wholeness. Like Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we need one another for life itself.

God is never far from us, no matter where we are. We need God, and we need one another. God's angels are always near at hand to minister unto us. God never lets us go. God never gives up on us. God is always just a prayer away with new life and hope.

©Patricia Farris 2023. Permission is given for brief quotation with attribution. All other rights reserved.

First United Methodist Church • 1008 Eleventh Street Santa Monica, CA
90403

www.santamonicaumc.org ■ 310-393-8258

Let me conclude this morning in the spirit of the season with these words, part of what is called the Prayer of St. Patrick, said to have been written on his breastplate. May we write these words on our hearts.

I arise today, through
The strength of heaven,
The light of the sun,
The radiance of the moon,
The splendor of fire,
The speed of lightning,
The swiftness of wind,
The depth of the sea,
The stability of the earth,
The firmness of rock.

I arise today, through
God's strength to pilot me,
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me...

And so... let us gather at the well of new life, seeking the wellspring of all healing and joy. Let us come, one and all. And let us walk together into a new future with hope, seekers all, in the adventures of life made new.

Thanks be to God!
AMEN.

Notes:

Our worship today draws on the resources of *a sanctified art* | sanctifiedart.org