

The Woman at the Well

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[0:00] All right, thank you. Jesus said to her, Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.

The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.

So, this morning, our sermon series through John's Gospel continues. It's kind of funny, not too long ago, I was talking with Deacon Mark about the sermon series.

And he said something to the effect of, I'd really hate to be the one who had to decide how to divide up chapter 4 in order to preach through it. Well, here I am.

The joke is kind of on him, too, because his September sermon will also be from chapter 4. So, looking at the large chunk of text in which we find this encounter between Jesus and the woman of Samaria, the preacher is faced with a bit of a choice.

[1:28] Either cover all of it by preaching a three-hour sermon, as some of our Anglican brothers and sisters in some parts of the world might do pretty typically, or break it up into a series of shorter sermons.

Getting nervous about which one I picked? No. Maybe you should be. We're going to do a series of shorter sermons on this passage.

And this morning, we'll be looking at the first 15 verses, which includes the beginning of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. We'll deal with his introduction to her, and stop just short of where his conversation with her takes a turn.

I think we'll find a lot to consider in these verses, so let's look together in John chapter 4, starting at verse 1. We'll read this. Now, when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples, he left Judea and departed again for Galilee, and he had to pass through Samaria.

So we're getting our setting in place for our story. Why did Jesus pass through Samaria? Well, we see that the Pharisees heard that Jesus was making more disciples than John.

[2:54] We're safe in saying that the Pharisees were wary of both the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of John the Baptist. They may have been seeking ways to pit the disciples of John and Jesus against one another.

To avoid pointless division or competition, given that John himself was glorifying Jesus, Jesus decides to take his ministry elsewhere. So he's going back to Galilee.

The most likely route for him to get there would have been through Samaria. So the text tells us he had to pass through Samaria. He had to. I'm inclined to think that the text means a little more than that, though.

I think the text is probably implying, in addition, that Jesus had sheep to seek and to save in Samaria. But that's where things get complicated.

So we need to take a bit of a detour to properly understand what's about to happen. The thought of Jesus as a Jewish teacher ministering to Samaritans would have been scandalous to his fellow Jews of the time.

[4:05] Why is that? Well, it has to do with who the Samaritans were and what the Samaritans believed. I won't get into the whole history of the Samaritans, but here is the Cliff Notes version.

They had a shared ancestry with the Jews, but over time they had intermarried with foreigners. In addition, their religion departed from what was accepted as Orthodox in Jewish practice.

They only recognized the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, and not the prophets. In addition, they had had their own temple, and their worship was centered in a location called Mount Gerizim, rather than in Jerusalem in the temple there.

Put this very short explanation together, and what you come to realize is that the prevailing Jewish mindset of the time regarded the Samaritans as heretics who were racially impure and unclean. And as we'll see, that does not stop Jesus one bit. That bit of background information, let's go to the text starting in verse 5. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

[5:16] Jacob's well was there, so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. A couple things to note here.

Jesus is traveling in an area that has ties to the Old Testament patriarchs. I'm not going to get into too much detail on that point, but it's worth remembering that the Jews and the Samaritans both regarded themselves as true descendants of the patriarchs, and were at enmity and viewed one another with suspicion.

That reality is going to have some bearing on the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, so keep that in mind. The other thing to note here is that verse 6 highlights something about the identity of Jesus.

He was thirsty and tired by the time he reached this town around noon. His divinity, of course, is apparent in the passage that follows, that he is the Son of God.

But here is humanity also in view. The whole passage builds on the reality that Jesus is the Word made flesh, he is the incarnate God, and his humanity is highlighted when we note that he stops to rest because he's tired and he's thirsty.

[6:28] And so stopping to rest, he meets a woman at the well. We read in verse 7, A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, Give me a drink.

His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?

For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. There's a lot to unpack in these verses. It all hinges on what the woman said to Jesus, wanting to know why he, as a Jewish man, is asking her, a Samaritan woman, for a drink.

Jesus is really crossing some religious and social barriers here. Because typically, a Jew in that time period would have seen the Samaritans as unclean.

So contact with them would have been seen as running the risk of becoming ritually unclean yourself. That she was a woman, and would have had an even lower social standing than a Samaritan man, added to the shock that Jesus would ask her for a drink.

[7:40] That would involve sharing water vessels, right? The prevailing thought was that a Jewish person should not do that.

That would definitely open up Jesus to becoming unclean. So she doesn't understand why he's doing it. And as a side note, his disciples are gone to buy food, presumably from Samaritans. Again, that's something that a good Jew and conventional wisdom probably wouldn't have done. That gets your food all impure, and you're going to eat that. Here's the thing that the woman doesn't yet understand about Jesus.

Here's the thing that a lot of people didn't understand about Jesus. He does not have to worry about becoming unclean or impure when he touches something unclean or impure.

Heard it said rightly that from what we see in the Gospels, Jesus has contagious purity and holiness. Over and over again, he comes into contact with people considered unclean, with people considered impure, with people considered unholy.

[8:55] And guess what? He doesn't become unclean, impure, or unholy, does he? No. What happens instead? Contact with Jesus makes the unclean clean.

It makes the impure pure, and it makes the unholy holy. Keep that in mind. We're going to come back to that.

After what she says, Jesus transitions into talking to her about himself. Jesus says, 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.

For the word who became flesh is at the well with her, and she has no idea yet. She has no idea yet that he gives those who receive him the right to become children of God.

So she says to him, Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.

[10:10] So she doesn't get it. And she's probably thinking of living water in natural terms of spring water. It's running, it's cold. In an arid environment, that would be a great thing to have handy.

But she doesn't see how Jesus can give her water. It's not as if he's carrying a shovel to dig a well. He's not even carrying a bucket, right?

She's probably wondering what's so great about this living water that he's talking about. If the water in this well was good enough for our father Jacob, surely it's good enough for this traveler who struck up a conversation with her.

How could he do any better than Jacob did when he dug the well? But Jesus is patient with her and continues teaching her.

Jesus says, Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.

[11:12] The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Jesus is getting at here is that he's not talking about low water.

He's talking about something else. Thinking back to Nicodemus, Jesus is talking about water that signifies new and abundant life.

He is talking about cleansing from sin. He's talking about a relationship with God here and in eternity. He is talking about being filled with God's Spirit and being in union with Christ, having your sins cleansed by his blood.

He's talking about something far greater than she realizes yet. I think of the best water I've ever had.

I got it from a spring in the hills of Kentucky when I was with my grandmother. But it is nothing compared to the living water we have in Jesus.

[12:33] It is nothing compared to being in relationship with the one who created us to enjoy him forever. That spring water was good, but you know what?

I still had a God-shaped hole in my heart after I drank that spring water. Hole that nothing filled until I came to know Jesus and until I encountered the living water that only he can give.

You and I will be thirsty until we find the spring of water welling up to eternal life. And it is found only in Jesus Christ.

Our passage ends with the woman still not understanding. But now, at least Jesus has her interest. She still thinks he's talking about natural thirst, but of course he's talking about something so much deeper than that.

She says, Sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.

She doesn't know what the living water is, but she knows she's interested.

[13:47] And that's where we leave off in the conversation. We'll pick up with what Jesus says next in next week's sermon. But for now, what do we take away from what we have read this morning?

Because I think we find a number of implications for our lives in this morning's text. First, I want to say this living water, this life with God that Jesus talks about and Jesus gives is something that we all need.

In that sense, we are all the Samaritan woman at the well, aren't we? If we have the living water, we will enjoy it now and enjoy it forever. And if we don't have the living water, we will never know last in joy and peace until we have it.

How do we get the living water? How do we get life? How do we get a relationship with God? How do we get last in peace? And how do we get joy that cannot be taken from us?

Jesus says that we can ask Him for living water and He will give it to those who ask. We find all of those things in Christ and in Christ alone.

[15:09] But that's not just for us to enjoy, which brings me to my next point. This account has strong implications for our mission as individual Christians and our mission as a church.

Jesus went on His mission to seek and to save the lost in the most unlikely of places. He went to people in this case of a different racial and religious background, people whom the Jewish people have viewed with hostility for generations.

And that just reminds me, I wonder how quick we are to step outside of our bubbles and our comfort zones in order to share the gospel.

I'll never forget when I was ordained a priest, I was given this charge. you are to teach, to warn, to feed, and provide for the Lord's family and to seek for Christ's sheep in the midst of this fallen world that they may be saved through Christ forever.

To seek for Christ's sheep in the midst of this fallen world that they may be saved through Christ forever. And that's not something, that's not merely something that I as a priest do by myself. [16:30] that's also something the church does as a team. So, are we doing that? Something that I ask the vestry at every monthly meeting, we go around the table, have you deliberately tried to form relationships with non-Christians in the past month?

I ask because it can be so easy for us to limit ourselves to our comfortable social circles and then pat ourselves on the back thinking that it's not our fault that all of our friends are believers and that we don't have anyone to share the gospel with.

Then I was listening a couple nights ago to our diocesan podcast, an interview with Archbishop Peter Jensen and the retired Bishop of Sydney, Australia. He noted that the church found in his time as bishop that immigrants were often more receptive to the gospel than native-born Australians.

I couldn't help but notice when he said that the parallels with our text as I was preparing for the sermon. Jesus, well, he found that his own people didn't receive him.

So what's he do? He takes a trip through Samaria to find some people who will. Strikes me that each of us needs to be aware that we are called not only to share the gospel with people whose cultural backgrounds are similar to our own.

[18:05] All people everywhere need Jesus. And we need that in the front of our minds as we go about our mission. The final point I want to make this morning is this.

The Samaritan woman was living a life of shame. And Jesus did not turn her away. It's generally believed that it was an unusual thing that she came to the well alone.

Women in that time usually went to the well in groups. It was also unusual for her to go around noon in the heat of the day. You would go in the morning or the evening.

What's the conclusion we draw from that? She is probably so ashamed of the way she is living her life.

We'll find out more about that next week. She is so ashamed of that that she wanted to avoid running into anyone. I'm afraid I'm going to tread on Mark's territory for next week.

[19:17] Sorry about that. But if we look at the interaction Jesus has with her he does not excuse her sin but he does not turn her away in shame and her sin does not change his willingness to give her living water to give her forgiveness of her sins to give her fellowship with God and eternal life.

I don't think she is the first or the last person to be afraid to approach God because of shame and fear.

This morning we're given this reminder water. Even if we feel unclean even if we feel ashamed we can still come to Jesus in repentance and faith and he will give us living water.

We are never so unclean that Jesus is unable to make us clean. So we are called to ask Jesus for living water.

All who ask receive and then it becomes in us a spring of water welling up to eternal life and we will never thirst again.

[20:56] In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit. Amen.