

Are You Thirsty?

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[0:00] Let us pray. Lord, may your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your son's greater glory, may it always be our supreme concern.

! This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen. Would you be seated, please. Well, it is a great joy to be back with you at Holy Trinity and to worship here in this wonderful new sanctuary where we can sing the praises of Almighty God.

Have you noticed that formal religion, as it seems to decline across our country, spiritual thirst seems to be growing.

Formal religion seems to be declining, but spiritual thirst seems to be growing. We see it everywhere, in magazines and bookstores, online.

I saw it as I drove into Syracuse. About Resurrection Tattoo Parlor. They took the name from the Bible. But we do not appear to be embarrassed about it anymore.

[1:18] In the suburbs of our nation's capital, where Brenda and I reside, you can have psychic analysis, tarot reading, and many other spiritual encounters, as our fellow Americans search for spiritual longing and the quest for truth and reality.

And I believe this spiritual quest is a search for the authentic in the midst of the mundane. Behind the glossy images of modern life, we're not ashamed to admit anymore that we are thirsty for more. For meaning and significance and for authenticity. Newsweek magazine printed a feature a few years back, and the entire edition was entitled, God and the Brain.

How we are wired for spirituality. Wow, that's quite something coming out of Newsweek. So how are we to make sense of these spiritual longings in our own lives, and in the lives of the people of Syracuse and across our nation?

For our Gospel reading this morning, in this season of Lent, Jesus helps us answer the question about spiritual thirst. What is this living water of which he speaks in John chapter 4?

[2:38] Here is Jesus, the master conversationalist, the supreme communicator, in communication with an unnamed Samaritan woman. If you have your Bibles with you, which you all will have because you're good Anglicans, if you'll have your Bibles with you, you might like to turn to John chapter 4.

If you have an electronic version, you're allowed to use that, so long as you don't check your Facebook while you're looking at the Bible reading this morning. John chapter 4. I say that because in one of our congregations I said something like that, and somebody tweeted me.

Bishop Jobs just told us not to tweet. There it was in the midst of my sermon. So just in case anybody's under any illusions, I put my iPad on flight mode so I can't get your messages while I'm preaching.

John chapter 4 in verse 10. Look with me, very important. If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is asking you, give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.

Jesus is talking about the gift, the gift of God. That's what he calls it. And the text helps us understand this gift. So I want to share with you four insights about this passage this morning.

[3:59] They're not all original to me, but I hope they'll be impacting to you as they have been to me. Four insights about the gift of God. Here's the first one.

The gift is a surprise. Let's look at that. At the beginning of this exchange, the woman is surprised. This Samaritan woman at the well. Verse 9, if you've got your Bibles, you can hear her note of bewilderment. Why are you talking to me? And at the end of the exchange, the disciples are surprised.

Caleb read it to us, verse 27. Why are you talking to her? Why is everybody so shocked here? Because Jesus is reaching out across every social and cultural and moral and religious barrier.

And thank God that he does. Firstly, she is a Samaritan. And he is a Jew. And they're in brackets in our text.

[5:02] There's not many verses in the Bible, but they're in brackets. But this one is. In verse 9, as if to emphasize the cross-cultural significance of what Jesus was doing here, we read, For the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

This cultural separation is somewhat perhaps like Rosa Parks riding at the front of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1956. You just don't do that.

Jews don't talk to Samaritans. Secondly, he is a woman. She is a woman. And he is a man. Good Jewish men do not, did not, even today do not, talk publicly to women.

If you go to Meir Sharim on the Bishop's Bible Study Tour next year, you will see this. There was actually a first century group of Pharisees known as the bruised and bleeding ones because of their tendency when averting their gaze from women to walk into doors and walls.

Well, we laugh, but we actually see this in Jerusalem today. So, she was a woman. And he was a man. Thirdly, she was alone.

[6:15] Why was she alone? I wonder if you've ever thought about that in verse 6. She is alone at the well at the sixth hour. We told a little detail from John. The hottest time of the day.

Why? Why is she alone at the worst possible time? Because she is a moral and social outcast. She's living with a man.

She's had multiple husbands. And by Jewish standards, serial marriage and cohabitation were utterly unacceptable. Nobody wants to be seen with this person.

Except Jesus. He knows the kind of person she is. And he talks to her. And in every social way, she is an outsider.

She is a gender outsider. She is a moral outsider. She's a religious outsider. She's a social outsider. And Jesus, the Son of God, blows through all of that and says, let's talk.

[7:19] Let's talk. And that's why everybody is surprised. You see, my dear brothers and sisters in the Holy Trinity this morning, the life of Jesus is full of these surprises.

Why does Jesus do this? If you've got your Bibles, look again. If you knew, he says, if you knew the gift of God, this living water is first and foremost a gift.

A gift. And it's about God. And it's about God's grace. It's a tremendous gift that we're being given here. It's not given on the basis of merit or pedigree or class or status or race or gender or good deeds.

There's a surprise element in true Christianity. This is, in fact, the focus of our diocesan synod with our archbishop and guests later in this spring season in May down in Binghamton.

I'll talk of it later. John chapter 4. Look at this woman. She didn't go there seeking to find Jesus.

She's not a seeker, as the church growth experts like to say.

[8:31] Let's have seeker-sensitive services so that we can reach the seekers. This woman wasn't a seeker. I don't think so. She wasn't praying. There was no moral living. There was no crying out.

And Jesus says to her, in effect, you are spiritually thirsty. And she says, well, what do you mean? And she's in the midst of the monotony of her daily routine, as so many of us are.

She's at the well. Why? Only for a bucket of water. And that's why she's there. But she meets Jesus. And when she leaves that well, her life is revolutionized forever.

Suddenly she is with one of the most famous people of history. And she becomes one of the most famous people of history.

And here we are, talking about her on Onondaga Road in Syracuse two millennia later. Isn't that incredible? A woman at the well. She's not praying.

[9:35] She's not seeking. But she meets Jesus, the Messiah, that day. And her life is transformed because God's free gift of grace is full of surprises.

You see, brothers and sisters, the most unlikely person is transformed by the grace of God forever. That's why I'm able to stand in this pulpit.

Because my life has been transformed not by me, but by the grace of God. That's God's grace. The living God of the Bible, our God. The God of grace and surprises.

The second thing to notice about this living water, if you look in the text with me, is that this living water brings ultimate satisfaction. Firstly, it's a gift.

And it's full of surprises. Secondly, it brings ultimate satisfaction. Would you say satisfaction? Do you notice this in the Gospel passage?

[10:36] Jesus does not talk to her here as he often does about the forgiveness of sins. That's a very important message. But notice, it's not Jesus' message here.

And that might surprise us. Jesus talks to her, not of forgiveness of sins, but of living water. Now, I imagine, I suppose, this imagery of living water loses a little bit of its power for us in Syracuse because we don't live in an arid climate, as looking out the window shows us today.

Most of us, I imagine, have never been life-threateningly thirsty. Although, I recall, Brenda, a time when you and I were in the deserts of Jordan where it seemed like that was the case.

Most of us, I imagine, have never seen anyone die of dehydration. But even in Israel today, in the land of the Bible, water is everything.

It is foundational. It is a social and political topic of conversation because it is fundamental to survival. Water is used in Israel today to negotiate peace with hostile surrounding countries.

[11:51] And it can be used by those countries as a weapon against the Jewish state. Lack of water will kill us before lack of food.

And our bodies cry out for the water. Life is inconceivable and unsustainable without water. And Jesus stunningly says, I have something your soul needs every bit as much, if more, if not more, than your body needs water from this well.

And look in verse 13 if you have it there. Extraordinary words from Jesus. Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, the water from the well.

But whoever drinks of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty again. Here's the implication from the words of Jesus.

Our Lord implies, if you go to any other source, any other source than me, your thirst will only get worse.

[13:00] You see, my brothers and sisters, I want to ask you if you have considered that this morning. Jesus is saying, if you put your soul into the care of any other cause or relationship more than mine, into any other hope, any other rest, any other beauty more than me, you're going to die of thirst even more quickly than you would imagine.

Wow! But Jesus does not stop there. If we look to Jesus for this living water that brings ultimate satisfaction, verse 14 of John chapter 4, the water from Jesus, he says, will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life.

Consider some things we thirst for as human beings. We thirst, do we not, for purpose? But if we are not living for Christ, what is your purpose going to be?

Is it the greater good of humanity or a political cause or our marriage, our family, our relationships? What happens if these causes and relationships fail as they tragically do?

What happens then? You die of thirst because life is so fragile. We thirst not just for purpose, but we thirst for love. And even if we find love in friendship or family or marriage or wherever it is, our friends are still mortal as well as sinful.

[14:36] And Jesus here is saying to the woman and amazingly saying to us, I can give you a purpose and a love and a peace and a hope and a beauty that permanently wells up from within you.

It's remarkable, is it not? Say yes, Bishop. It's remarkable, verse 14. Jesus says this water is not a well, he says.

He says it's a spring. It's not merely a well because wells collapse and they get filled in and they go bad. Where I live in Virginia, I'm on water supply from a well and I have to keep my eye on it.

But springs bubble up no matter how much junk you throw on them. And Jesus is saying in me, you will have a spiritual purpose and a spiritual love which transcend and survive whatever happens in family, your relationships, your career, your ministry, in politics.

No matter what happens to you, my joy, says Jesus, will continue to bubble through. And it's such good news. Amen? It's good that you say amen.

[15:46] We're allowed to say amen. Even as Anglicans, you know, we're allowed to do that. It's one of the greatest realities of the Christian life. It doesn't matter how much junk is dumped on top.

There is a spring from within us, from Jesus, welling up to eternal life. Eternal life. You can't stop it. And that is what Jesus offers. Not only this woman, but he offers you. He offers me. He offers all of humanity. This exchange is first a surprise. Secondly, it's a gift of God's grace.

It's about discovering ultimate satisfaction. And then thirdly, it comes in stages. Think of the woman at the well. Jesus, the master conversationalist, draws this woman in from complete spiritual

indifference to spiritual reality.

And there seems to be, you might find more, but there seems, as I looked at this week, to be four stages here. Firstly, he meets her on his own. Jesus, most likely, would have never had this conversation with this woman if she had come to the well with other women from the town.

[17:06] Yet, here is the opportunity. She's on her own. And the answer is, she gets herself alone. How? By messing up her life.

And Jesus deals with that mess. You see, when you're successful, when you have a lot of friends, when you have people around you and you're doing well and life is full and you're busy, you don't generally sit around thinking about the meaning of life and wondering whether there is a God or if Jesus is real or what you're ultimately living for.

Because you're happy and you're busy and you're successful and things are going well. But when you mess up, or when the doctor says, you know, I'm a little bit worried about that lump.

Or when you find your husband is having an affair, then somehow you begin to really think about the big things. And in John chapter 4, Jesus meets this woman on her own at the well.

So, she's on her own. Secondly, look with me, if you've got your Bibles there. He engages her. And notice what he engages. I call it her intellectual interest.

[18:21] He stimulates her thinking. He doesn't bombard her with Bible texts. Oh, the danger of doing that. He engages her intellect and sets her thinking.

And he hints at something satisfying and exciting beyond her experience. Look if you've got your Bibles, verse 10. If you knew, Jesus uses an everyday illustration about water.

And he gives it a tantalizing twist. You know, brothers and sisters, we do not have a real experience of God that ever leaves out our brains.

We're not meant to leave our brains at the church door when we come into church on a Sunday morning. Because, in fact, Jesus tells us we are to love him with all our heart and with all our mind. And he engages this woman's intellectual interest. Are you allowing Jesus to engage your intellectual interest?

[19:24] Because this is important. It's why we study the Bible. It's why we read Christian authors. Why we go to Bible college. Thirdly, look, Jesus gets very personal.

Verse 15. The woman at the well has come as far as she can. And Jesus talks of living water. But she seems to be stuck back on physical water. Do you notice that?

And they're talking at two different levels. She's saying, tracking to the well to get the water. That's my real problem. And Jesus says suddenly, well, it seems so out of place.

He says, go and call your husband. And this seems to be out of sequence. It looks like a change of subject. But on the face of it, it's a bit battling. And the woman says, the woman is saying, I'm not spiritually thirsty.

That's not my problem. My problem is the daily grind of getting to this well and surviving. Oh, yes, says Jesus. Well, go and get your husband.

[20:23] But she doesn't have a husband. She's had five husbands. And now she's on to her sixth man. Verse 18. So what is all of this about? Why does this personal history come in here?

What does it represent for this woman? Passion of some kind? A hunger? A longing? For what? A man? Well, possibly. For love? Yes. Closeness.

Acceptance. Significance. Undoubtedly. And Jesus is helping her. And he's stretching her intellectually to see that she is looking in the wrong place.

This woman is drinking deeply. But she is drinking at the fountain of male relationships and sex. And they are not delivering for her.

And our Lord is highlighting that our emptiness is at root, not circumstantial in origin, but it is moral and spiritual.

[21:19] People of God at Holy Trinity this morning. The question is, where are you drinking deeply? Because we're all drinking deeply somewhere.

We're all looking somewhere for love and acceptance and significance and purpose. But where is it that you are drinking for this woman? It was the relationships with men.

And heaven knows sex has lost none of its power since the first century AD. But for you it may be something completely different. It might be career.

Or status. Or appearance. Or acceptance. Or friends. Or money. Or political causes. Or church things. Or control of your own life. It may be a number of things.

But you need to see where it is that you are drinking deeply. So that you can find this living water. Each of us need to know our idols.

[22 : 21] I continue to discover mine. Brenda will tell you about mine. She's very helpful in helping me discover my own. And I'm grateful for it. You know, John chapter 4 is such a wonderful text for us on this third Sunday on Lent.

But I'm so pleased it's in our new lectionary. Jesus knew in John 4 that the issue for this woman was men. That's where she was sinking her bucket of her soul.

And it was coming up empty every time. And notice how Jesus very gently but firmly forces her to face it. It's not about condemnation.

It's about showing up the false hopes for what they are. The bogus saviors. The broken earthly cisterns. We all go to in one form or another to meet our various needs instead of the well of eternal life.

And when Jesus meets us, His gaze peels away all the masks we wear. And He deconstructs all the false faces we show to the world.

[23 : 27] I'm sure you will have noticed this. To be seen by Jesus is to experience the truth incarnate in our very midst. Look at verse 11.

The woman at the well's initial assumption had been that Jesus has nothing to offer her. Do you see that little clue in verse 11? She says, Sir, you have nothing to draw water with.

She's still at that point. The well is so deep. And I've discovered that this is sometimes our initial response to Jesus as well.

He has nothing for me. And yet Holy Trinity Syracuse, Jesus is God. He was and is and is to come. He is, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, able to do abundantly more than all we can ask or think.

Jesus meets this woman at the well on her own and He engages her intellectual interest. He gets personal. And then He introduces Himself as the answer.

[24 : 34] Look with me. Verse 26. One of the clearest statements Jesus ever made in the Gospels about His Messiahship. In the whole of the New Testament He says, I who speak to you am He.

It's a wonderful little phrase. When the woman at the well encountered Jesus, it was first of all a surprise. Secondly, it brought in and it brings ultimate satisfaction.

Thirdly, it comes in stages. And finally this morning, brothers and sisters, it's open to everyone. To everyone. Come on. God created you and me to live for Him.

And if you're not, you have hijacked, in effect, your own life. And you are living as if you were your own God. And then you're sinning against Him.

And sin needs to be paid for. You see, Jesus deals with that in this conversation. Because this woman does what many of us do when we get a little hot in conversations.

[25 : 38] Or is it only me that gets a little hot in conversations? You know when the Spirit of God is convicting you, and it gets a little bit too intense, many times what we do best is deflect.

And we move on to something else. And I see this happening all the time. This woman does it. She attempts to deflect the conviction of God, the Holy Spirit, and she throws back her objections.

If you share the gospel with people, you'll find they do this all the time. When I share the gospel with them, I'm sure they've experienced it. You share Christ. You tell them about Jesus. They're at the point of decision, and bang!

They throw a curveball to deflect the conviction. And they say, But why does God allow suffering? Or, why did He create hell?

You hadn't even been talking about suffering. You hadn't even been talking about hell. But that is the deflection, because of the conviction of God. Here in verse 10, Here's the woman's deflection.

[26 : 44] She says, I see you are a prophet. Which mountain should we be worshipping on? My goodness, she's having a conversation with the Messiah, and all of a sudden she says, Which church should I be going to?

Which mountain? Should I be an Anglican or a Presbyterian? Interesting. At the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim or in Jerusalem?

Where do we really find God? Tell me, she says. And Jesus answering cautiously, In neither temple. But notice He does not say, In no temple. Notice that.

Allow me to explain very quickly. Look at the way Jesus answers this curveball deflection from this woman. He's very precise. Verse 21. The time is coming, literally, the hour, the moment, the hour is coming, when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, will you worship the Father.

What does that mean? Well, I'm pleased you asked. Before this time of Jesus, you did need a temple. But the hour is coming, says Jesus.

[27 : 53] What is this hour? In John's Gospel, the phrase, the hour, or this hour, you study it, is always a reference to Jesus' exaltation through His death and resurrection.

Later in John's Gospel, Jesus says to the Father, the same phrase, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you.

It's the same phrase. Jesus implies that we do need a temple, but here is the good news. He is that temple. We do need a sacrifice where sin is paid for, but here is the good news.

He is that sacrifice. And brothers and sisters, I suspect running through this whole passage in John chapter 4, with its metaphor of water and thirst, is a beautiful piece of symbolism that none of us are meant to miss.

And the encounter happens because Jesus is thirsty, and He asks a woman for a drink. And this isn't the last time John records Jesus being thirsty.

[28 : 59] Can you recall the other occasion? In His last hour on the cross, in John 19, Jesus says, I thirst.

And in the language of Psalm 22, He cries out on the cross, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And a little later in the Psalm we read, My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You lay me in the dust of death. Don't miss this. Jesus did that for you. He went to the cross for you. The wrath and justice of God that we deserved are poured out on Him, and He dies with thirst, so that we can have living water.

He has the ultimate spiritual thirst and dies in torment, so that we can enjoy the cool, everlasting water of the grace of God. John chapter 4, an unforgettable, life-transforming moment, when a Samaritan woman connected with Jesus.

[30 : 05] Jesus. And many of us here, myself included, would tell you of such moments in our own lives, in a sermon, in a song, in a conversation, for me on one of my training runs, at the gym, while cooking, in a moment of silence, Jesus takes us by surprise.

Sometimes it comes in stages. Always he brings ultimate satisfaction. Augustine of Hippo, in 354 AD, an early Christian theologian, whose writings influenced the development of Western Christianity, in what is known as his confessions, he states, You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in thee.

We only find, only ever find, ultimate eternal peace in Christ, and in Christ alone. And you know, just glance at some of John's little details here as we close, suddenly Jesus means everything to this woman.

Look at verse 29. She says to everyone in her town, Come and see. Come and see. A man who told me everything that I ever did.

Come and see. I'd be surprised, very surprised, in fact, this morning, if there was, in this moment of encounter, not somebody here, who's receiving a similar encounter with Jesus.

[31 : 43] That's what happens when his word is read. Are you thirsty for what you know? Must be something more. Are you hungry for spiritual reality? Do you know the gift of God and the one who offers it?

Jesus says, I know your name. I know all about you, in fact. I know the hurts and the heartaches and the things that are hidden, the joys and the hopes, the fears and the longings.

And I know where you're drinking deeply. Would you like the gift of God, which is eternal life in Jesus? Maybe you've heard all of this before, but perhaps now is the moment, one of those few defining moments in our lives, where we can, each one of us, stop and pause and consider our response to the Master.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you know where we're drinking deeply. You know our name.

You know all about us. You were there and knit us together in our mother's womb. There, as you hung on the cross, you were pouring out your love for us.

[32 : 59] Thank you for speaking to us from your word. We admit that we've been living our lives without you. Thank you for your great love and mercy and for the offer of the living water of eternal life.

We desire with all our hearts to come to you this morning. By your spirit, help us to make this step to drink deeply from you and from you alone through Christ our Lord.

Amen.