

The Samaritan woman encounters Jesus \* John 4  
October 23, 2022 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

I want you to think for a minute about the kind of person you'd least expect to come to our church. You come in one morning to church and see somebody sitting there that you'd never expect to be there – who are you picturing? The kids who go to Why Not with their piercings and eye liner? The people you see around the pawn shops downtown? The sort of people that polite society would call 'not quite respectable'?

Keep that person in mind, because that's the kind of person that encounters Jesus this morning.

John chapter 4 is our passage of Scripture for today and I invite you to turn there with me. John chapter 4.

As John chapter 4 opens, Jesus discovers that He is gaining more disciples than John and so He decides to clear out of Dodge to give John more room to do his ministry. And so He decides to go back to Galilee. Which means, verse 4,

4 Now he had to go through Samaria.

If you look on the map that I've given you on the handout for today, you'll see that what we think of as essentially Israel in our day was divided into three parts in Jesus' day. If you don't have the map in front of you, just picture a sandwich. The northern part, the top piece of bread is Galilee and that's Jewish territory. The bottom bread, down to the south is Judea and that's Jewish territory too. Right in the middle though, the meat of the sandwich, is Samaria. And if you wanted to get from Judea to Galilee, you had to go through Samaritan territory.

But there's a problem here - Jews and Samaritans did not get along. See, seven hundred years before this happened, this land was all Jewish territory. It was the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel. Then the Exile happened and Assyria carried the Northern Kingdom off into exile and brought foreigners and pagans in from other parts of their empire to repopulate the land.

But here's the thing, they didn't take everybody into Exile; they took the top strata of the population and left everybody else behind. And so you end up with these essentially redneck, hillbilly Israelites living side by side with pagan foreigners. Eventually they start to intermingle and start to intermarry and before you know it, you have this hybrid of Judaism that's kind of like hillbilly religion and that's the Samaritans.

Now while all of that was happening, the Southern Kingdom of Israel (Judah) was taken into exile in Babylon and they were there for some seventy years. But then they came back and they discovered that there were these people living in their land – the Samaritans. Long story short, the Jews got the North and the South and the Samaritans got the middle and the Jews and the Samaritans became bitter enemies.

Which is a problem if you want to get from one piece of bread to the other because unless you want to take the long way and cross the river at Jericho, travel north thru Gentile country and then cross back over again, you gotta go through Samaria.

And so, according to verse 4, Jesus had a three day journey ahead of Him through Samaria.

Let's pick it up in verse 5.

5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

So picture this – it's around noon and the hot Mediterranean sun is beating down on Samaria. Jesus and His disciples have been walking all morning and they're getting tired. They get close to a town and decide it's time for a pit stop. The disciples go into town to see if they can buy some food but Jesus stays behind at the local watering hole. Literally.

Now, as Jesus is sitting there, resting His weary feet, someone else comes up to the well. It's a Samaritan woman come to get some water.

Now immediately, there are at least three things wrong with this picture because first, what is this woman doing drawing water at noon? At the hottest part of the day? When do you do your hardest work? No! You do it in the morning when it's still cool. And second, why is this woman alone? Normally women would collect water together, in groups, and yet here she is all by herself.

Right away we have some indication that this woman doesn't quite fit within her society. She's come by herself in the heat of the day, probably wanting to avoid the gossipy ladies who draw water in the morning and we're left with the impression that she doesn't quite fit.

Now that's two things, I said that there were three things wrong with this picture. Number 3 – verse 7 – Jesus says to the woman – 'Will you give me a drink?'

Now immediately, everyone in polite society would say – 'what is He doing?! Talking to a woman?' The general mindset at the time was that you shouldn't say much to a lady, even to your own wife or daughter, and Jesus, a single man, talking to a woman, and a SAMARITAN woman at that, was scandalous. And yet Jesus was not about to allow the barriers of polite society to keep anyone from the Kingdom of God. And so He asked her for a drink.

The Samaritan woman was shocked – verse 9 she says - "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."<sup>i</sup>

Just like with Nicodemus, Jesus is talking on a spiritual level and this woman's thinking on a strictly literal, physical level. Jesus says to Nicodemus – 'you must be born again' and Nicodemus says 'I need to get back in my mother's womb?' To the Samaritan woman, Jesus says – 'I can give you living water' and the Samaritan woman says -

11 "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?"

12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

She clearly knows the history of this well, the importance of her forefathers and she can't possibly imagine that Jesus has anything better to give than what her forefathers bequeathed to the town.

13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,  
14 but whoever drinks the water (=spiritual life) I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Jesus makes it clear that He is not talking about H<sub>2</sub>O here – Jesus is talking about *living* water - spiritual life that bubbles up from within. Divine power that quenches existential thirst and carries us into eternity.

Well that sounds good to this woman and so she says – verse 15 –

15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." (She hasn't *quite* got it yet, but close and so Jesus says -

16 He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

17 "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. (He commends her at least for having the honesty to say that – but this is not the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth - )

18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

The rabbis from around this time said that three was kind of the upper limit for divorces and this lady's gone through five. And now she's shackled up with a guy and they're not even married – no wonder she came to the well at noon, far from the prying eyes of polite society.

I feel for this lady. She hasn't had the easiest life; clearly she's been used and abused by a series of men, but, it strikes me that she's probably made some bad decisions along the way too. My heart always aches when I see people like this, because I think, if only you knew how much God loves you and how He can intervene and help, if you'll only let Him.

At any rate, this lady isn't quite ready to go into such sensitive areas with Jesus and so she says -

19 "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet.

20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Now I'm not entirely sure what to make of this. Because on one hand, it's very possible that this is just a diversionary tactic. She doesn't want to talk about her spiritual health and so she redirects the conversation in another, less personal, religious direction. It's like saying 'could God make a rock so big He can't lift it?'

On the other hand though, Jesus HAS just revealed that He has supernatural knowledge, that He is a prophet of some sort, and so she takes the opportunity to ask what would have been the burning question between Jews and Samaritans at this time in history – where is the proper place to worship?

21 Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.

24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Now to understand what's going on here, you need to know that the Jews and Samaritans had rival centres of worship. The Jews of course had their temple in Jerusalem, but the Samaritans, who only believed the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, insisted that the proper place for worship was the place where Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac – Mt. Gerazim. And that mountain would have been in the background of this conversation between Jesus and the woman.

Here though Jesus announces – 'location, location, location' is no longer the issue. It's not WHERE you worship that counts, it's HOW you worship and real worship is done in spirit and in truth.

There are a handful of ways to understand this, the most common being that worship is both a heart thing and a head thing. True worship comes from people who worship with their whole heart, empowered by the Holy Spirit – that's worship in spirit – AND from people who worship with their minds, according to what God has taught us in the Bible – that's the truth part. Worship in spirit and in truth then means heartfelt worship that is doctrinally sound. That's probably what it means.

It struck me though this week that there might be something else at play, given that this is a conversation about the temple. At this point in history animal sacrifices were still happening in worship at Mt. Gerazim and at Jerusalem and so when Jesus says worship in spirit, He means, rather than the physical animal sacrifices that were happening in the temple, worship spiritually because God is Himself Spirit. And of course we all know how easy it is to just go through the motions – you could offer an animal in sacrifice but still not really care about God – I think He's saying – worship in truth – really mean what you do in your spiritual worship.

Whatever the case, Jesus says 'the time is coming and indeed has come when we will worship God not physically, with sacrifices, but spiritually, with all our soul and mind and strength and we will worship Him in truth, not falsehood.

Well, 25 The woman said [maybe not entirely convinced], "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." [He'll work out the differences.]

26 Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

And with that, Jesus reveals who He really is – not just some random guy at the well, looking for a drink of water; He's the Messiah, sent by God, to offer living water. What do you think? Is this woman going to receive it?

27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

28 Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,

29 "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

Now on one hand, this could seem like a pretty non-committal statement – ‘could this be the Christ?’ It almost sounds like she’s not really sure. But I’m not sure that that’s the case. One of the commentaries I read this week makes the point that this is actually, culturally speaking, a brilliant, evangelistic move:

“Note how clever she is. Women weren’t permitted to *tell* men anything in this culture. So she doesn’t declare that she’s found the Messiah. If she’d done that, they might have laughed at her or been furious that she’d dared to address them publically. Instead, she poses a question to the men: ‘Could this be the Messiah?’ She appealing to their egos: ‘I need you big, strong, mentally gifted man to help me out here.’ Can’t you just imagine them responding, ‘well little lady, how about we go out there and straighten out this whole thing for you.’ She is brilliant.”<sup>ii</sup>

I think they’re on to something. I think that, as Max Lucado says, she went to them and said ‘He told me everything I ever did – and still cared about me!’<sup>iii</sup> And I can’t help but point out that just one chapter back, 3:5, Jesus says - "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

And what are the two conversation topics that Jesus has just had with the lady? Living water and worship in the Spirit. John LOVES metaphors and hinting at things so I wonder if this is his way of telling us that she took a drink.

And it’s clear that this town was a receptive audience because while she was talking to the townsfolk, Jesus was talking to His disciples and saying – “look around, people are eager to come into the Kingdom and not just Jews; Samaritans too! The fields are ripe for harvest and the harvest is here” (vs 35).

In fact, verse 40, when the people heard Jesus speak, they urged Him to stay with them and He stayed two days.

41 And because of his words many *more* became believers.

42 They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

What a journey eh? She started off an outsider, drawing water from a well in the heat the day; she encountered Jesus and ended up offering living water to her whole town. Jesus brought her from the edges of society to the centre of the Kingdom and worked through her to show them all that He is Saviour of the world. Jesus transformed this woman from a misfit to a witness.

That’s what happened when the Samaritan woman encountered Jesus - what does this mean for us? How does this woman’s encounter with Jesus impact our lives?

Let me give you three things:

1. What’s in your well? If you are a follower of Jesus, if you’ve been born again, then you have living water flowing within you. You have a fountain of vitality bubbling up to eternal life inside you. I mean, just think about the difference between a stale, stagnant pond of water laying in the middle of a field

somewhere and the crisp, clean water that come running from your tap. The pond water stinks, it breeds mosquitos; that's what collects when we live for sin and self. But when we encounter Jesus and receive living water from Him, it washes out that stagnant water and fills us with life-giving water. Tap into that water to give you joy and confidence and vitality.

And 2. Let that living water flow out to people around you as life-giving words and deeds. James says in James 3:11: "Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?" The answer of course being no – so let living water flow from you not the stale stagnant kind.

And let it flow to everyone - not just people who are like you. The story of the Samaritan woman shows us that this living water is for all people. The contrast between Nicodemus in chapter 3 and the Samaritan woman in chapter 4 couldn't be more striking. Bruce Milne writes:

"Nicodemus was a Jewish male, a highly learned teacher, a Pharisee scrupulous in his adherence to all the tenets of the law, and as a member of the Sanhedrin a person of considerable public repute and authority... by contrast ... the Samaritan [woman was a racial outsider], illiterate..., with a lifestyle in flagrant contradiction to the law, and therefore publicly despised and ostracized. Yet, 'both needed Jesus'."<sup>iv</sup>

This is where my thought exercise from the beginning comes from – the people you see outside of the Sally Ann shelter, the people at Why Not and Friendship House – those are our culture's Samaritan women. People who've been dealt a bad hand and made some bad decisions along the way. You might not expect to see them in church and yet Jesus made a point of reaching out to minister to them. That should be in our playbook too. There is room for everyone in the Kingdom.

3. And if Jesus can make the Samaritan woman an effective witness, then He can do the same through you. Just let the living water that is inside of you overflow to be a blessing to others. The Samaritan woman didn't have this complex evangelistic strategy; she simply said 'this guy knows everything I ever did, and still cares about me.' That was enough to bring people to hear from Jesus for themselves. Let the living water within you overflow to all people so that they will want to come to Jesus to encounter them for themselves.

Let the living water inside of you overflow to all people because Jesus make misfits into witnesses.

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<sup>i</sup> There are a handful of place in the OT where God refers to Himself as 'living water.' Jeremiah 2:13, God says that His people have forsaken Him, the spring of living water and Zechariah 14:8 says that on the day that the LORD appears, living water will flow freely. Jesus is drawing on a long history of understanding 'living water' as divine power, as spiritual life, as God Himself, and yet the Samaritan woman doesn't get it.

<sup>ii</sup> Les Christie and David Nystrom, *A Youth Worker's Commentary on John*, vol 1, 163.

<sup>iii</sup> Max Lucado, *Lucado Life Lessons Study Bible Notes*, John 4:1.

<sup>iv</sup> Bruce Milne, "The mission to Samaria (4:1-42)," *The Message of JOHN (BST)*.