Third Sunday of Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas,
8 March 2026
John 4:5-42

Jesus seems to be alone, as the passage tells us that the disciples had gone to the city to buy food. He is in enemy territory. The mutual antagonism is real and historic. Judeans don't interact with Samaritans, whom they see as impure. Why did the disciples leave him alone? Was this his idea? If he is not alone, why would John not mention others? Is Jesus not concerned for his safety? He could be robbed, harassed, assaulted. Why is this of no concern to the disciples?

There is a Samaritan woman who comes around noon to draw water at the well. Why is she there at noon, when the tradition is that women, in groups, would have come to draw water very early in the morning? Did she sleep late? Why is she alone and not with a group? Has she been shunned by the community? What kept her in the village until this late hour? Is she of limited intellectual abilities and perhaps doesn't know that this is not safe for her? Does she not know that a woman alone in a wilderness could be subject to all sorts of perils?

The alone Jesus meets the alone Samaritan woman. If they are not alone, why doesn't John mention how scandalized bystanders would have been to see a Judean man speak to a woman who is unaccompanied? This has echoes of impropriety on both of their parts. She should have stayed away when she saw a man alone sitting by the well. He should have kept his own distance, but instead he speaks to her. This violates all the social conventions: Jews don't interact with Samaritans; men don't speak to women who are not accompanied; social mores indicate that only prostitutes talk to men in public. Why is this encounter between the alone Jesus and the alone woman happening?

Without regard for custom or propriety, both alone characters engage in conversation. He says, "Give me a drink." She responds, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" She shows no fear, no lack of historical and cultural knowledge, no insecurity or naiveite. She is curious and surprised by his outrageous behavior. There is something about this man that is different. She feels safe challenging him. She does not seem concerned about the gossip of those who might see her, which perhaps reinforces the idea that they are alone. Jesus engages her further in theological conversation, "If you knew God and me, you would have asked for living water!" This is a confusing statement to the woman. Living water reminds the reader of Exodus 17:1-7 when Moses struck the rock and living, running, flowing, fresh water came out of it. How can this mysterious man give her living water out here in the wilderness? If somehow she could get access to this living water, perhaps she wouldn't have to walk all the way to the well by herself? Perhaps, the lonely journeys could be avoided? She says, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Are you greater than Jacob?" Is the author pointing to the superiority of the Messiah over the Patriarchs? Is he making a distinction between the

still waters of Judean tradition and the living waters of the Gospel? Could she understand the distinction between still and living water?

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.” Water that comes from the outside and produces temporary results is inferior to water that flows from the internal spring of the heart and leads to eternal life. This reminds us of Jesus’ talk with Nicodemus. Jesus said, “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Jesus is offering this woman new life, a new existence, the type of water that will quench her thirst forever. He is acknowledging that the satisfaction of physical thirst is important, but the most profound thirst in a person is spiritual. The most dangerous desert is not the physical wilderness, but the arid, dry, and dead desert of a soul separated from God. Only his living water can turn that desert into fertile ground, teaming up with life, love of self and neighbor, and a living relationship with God.

There is a sense that the woman still believes this to be physical water, for she says to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” She shows a lack of understanding which is natural. She is a village woman and not a theologian from an Ivory League school. Jesus will now seek to convince her of his superiority over Jacob and her traditions by showing her that he knows her. He has supernatural knowledge about her life that only someone well acquainted with her would have known. He tells 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 now recognizes Jesus as a prophet. What follows is a deeply theological conversation about the place of the Temple in the religious life of the people. The Samaritans worship on the mountain, while the Judeans worship at the Temple. Jesus says, “Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem… the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”

Then the conversation switches to the Messiah. She says to him, “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Samaritans had the same messianic expectations of the Judeans. In fact, they are distant cousins and share many of the same beliefs. Jesus then reveals his identity to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” At this point, “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?’” In the meantime, the disciples arrived back at the well, become shocked by his behaviors (talking alone with a Samaritan woman), and try to get him to eat. Jesus looks at his surroundings and tells them, “See how the fields are ripe for harvesting… I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

The Samaritans are ripe for harvesting. They have had a spiritual hunger for centuries and they have eagerly awaited the Messiah. Those same people considered by the Judeans as impure, inferior, outside of God's covenants, unrighteous, separated from God by their failure to live up to every letter of the Mosaic Law… are the fertile soil where the seeds of the Gospel will grow. Jesus' Gospel will be a Gospel for those on the margins. The spiritually thirsty will be fed by living water, whereas those who believe they are full, and have no need for the type of Messiah this Galilean shows them, will continue to be thirsty. This is a great paradox, and it fits well with what has come before in the Gospel of John. So far, all the passages in John have been about Transformation. "Jesus changes water into wine. Jesus proclaims a change from the physical temple into the temple of his body. Jesus teaches that those born of the flesh must be transformed into those having been born of the Spirit. Now Jesus transforms conventional expectations and challenges the status quo." (https://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john4x5.htm).

The passage ends by telling us that "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him" when they come and see and listen to him. They tell the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." This is the harvest Jesus is talking about, and the message for the disciples and for us is to be able to read the signs of the times. Those most isolated from us, those on the margins, those for whom the world has no value, those who are in need of justice and compassion, those who are truly in need are the very people to whom Jesus sends us. They are ripe for harvesting, and it is up to us, the disciples of Jesus, to share the Gospel of Salvation with them.

Beyond this obvious lesson, this passage is warning us against self-sufficiency. Be careful not to believe we are righteous, and religious, and better than the average bear. Be careful not to become so puffed up with our right doctrines, right practices, right liturgies, right prayers, right traditions, and right friends that we become vessels full of our own selves, unable to receive the living water God offers us through his Son, Jesus. A full cup has no space for new living water. Those who have arrived have nowhere else to go. Lent invites us to acknowledge our arrogance and to welcome God fully into our lives. In the words of John the Baptist, "we must decrease, that Christ may increase in our lives." Our water satisfies temporarily, but only Christ provides eternal, living, water.

May he continue to bless us. Amen!