

# Living Water!

Learning to Live Inside Out, Lent 2023

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John 4: 1-42

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So many people love this story! Among them are both folks who have been divorced and women with a call to ministry because this woman clearly belongs in both groups and Jesus welcomes her. But what was her name? John did not say. Therefore, out of a long list of currently popular baby names, to retell you her story I choose Amy this year only because Amy means “beloved one.”

Amy is the complete opposite to Nicodemus with whom we were reacquainted last week.<sup>1</sup> Nicodemus was a Jewish man with authority as a Pharisee who belonged to the Sanhedrin and did his important work at the Temple in Jerusalem when it was full and busy with people coming and going. (John 3:1) Amy was a homemaker in a small village who we believe was shunned by other women because she came to get her water from the well at noon rather than when her peers did in the morning when it was still cool. We assume with his social standing that Nicodemus had one wife, but Jesus knows Amy had been married five times and was living with yet another man. (John 4:18) Nicodemus started his conversation with Jesus (John 3:2), but Jesus spoke to Amy first. (John 4:7) And the most striking contrast between them is this: Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night (John 3:2) but Amy found Jesus sitting at her village well at noon. (John 4:6)

In the first century, Jews and Samaritans were openly feuding cousins; both descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jews worshipped in the Temple, Samaritans did not. It was no surprise to the first Christians that Amy questioned Jesus when he asked her for a drink. “The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a (Jewish man), ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’” (John 4: 9) Shocking! If you wonder how she knew Jesus was a Jew, how he was dressed told her everything. But how did Jesus know about her five former husbands? Well, that is the rest of the story.

But let’s begin again at the beginning. How did Jesus come to be in Samaria in the first place? Once again, we look back in his story to John 2, when Jesus was teaching at the Temple. Not only did he teach there, but his disciple John reported

that he cleared the Temples of vendors, driving them out with a whip! In John 3, Nicodemus came at night to meet with Jesus under the cover of darkness. After meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus left Jerusalem and went into the wilderness of Judea where John, his cousin who had baptized him (John 1: 29-34), was still preaching and baptizing (John 3:28). From there Jesus decided to return to Galilee. (John 4:3) His most direct route from Judea to Galilee ran right through Samaria. At Jacob's Well, Jesus waited alone as his disciples scattered to find food. (John 4:8) As he waited, Jesus looked for someone to help him draw water from the well.

At this moment John, a most excellent Jewish story teller, imitated a story both Jesus and Amy knew from Genesis. When their shared ancestor first fled his parents' home, Jacob arrived at a well where he met the love of his life, Rebecca. Jacob helped Rebecca draw water for the flock she was herding. (Genesis 29) Amy knew that story as well as Jesus. A Samaritan she believed all wells were sacred places, but especially Jacob's Well where Jesus sat. They both knew that Jacob's sons had four mothers. There was Rachel, his other wife who was Rachel's sister, Leah, and their slaves who were his concubines, Bilhah and Zilpha. Jesus and the woman at the well may have been very distant cousins, but they still had shared stories in their family closet. This story from Genesis is one of many the very earliest people to follow Jesus knew.

But this shared common knowledge brings up one more striking contrast between Nicodemus and Amy. He struggled to understand Jesus' references to their shared Scripture, but she understood Jesus in a heartbeat. Let's read that small bit from her story one more time, but this time from *The Message*.

Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life."

The woman said, "Sir, give me this water so I won't ever get thirsty, won't ever have to come back to this well again!"

(John 4:13-15, *The Message*, Peterson, 1993)<sup>ii</sup>

While Nicodemus struggled to understand Jesus in the dark of night, but Amy caught his message of grace and forgiveness in a heartbeat at noon. Let's just pause and take that in.

(Dear reader, take as long as you need before reading on.)

If you are a person who has remarried, especially after a divorce, what are you feeling? If you are a woman, who has only heard men preach this passage, what are you feeling? If you are a man who has never been divorced, what are you feeling? If you have never been married, what do you feel?

Whatever your feeling, know that you are standing at the very edge of grace, that deep assurance that Jesus is waiting for you with living water. Whatever your past holds past does not matter, but you do. Christ loves you as deeply as he loved her.

Her story is particularly comforting for everyone who has recovered from divorce. But in the opening, I said this is also a favorite story of women with a call to ministry. Why is this? Well, it isn't about the part of John 4 that we have read so far. What is grace for women with a call to ministry is still coming in the rest of the story.

Let's go on.

I will summarize John 4: 15 to 38 here, but I encourage you to open your Bible and check my facts. First, Jesus brought up the issue of her five husbands and the fact that she was now living with a sixth man. (John 4: 15-18) Then they discussed the difference of opinion between Jews and Samaritans about where we should worship and the promised coming of the Messiah. (John 4: 19-26) "The woman said, ' . . . I do know that the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we'll get the whole story.' (Jesus said) 'I am he, . . . You don't have to wait any longer or look any further.'" (John 4: 25-26, *The Message*) This woman shunned by other women was the first person Jesus openly told that he was the promised Messiah.

Just then Jesus' disciples returned, shocked that he was speaking to this person who was both a Samaritan and a woman. While Jesus he ate with the disciples, (John 4:31) and taught them about how real people were longing for grace, she went back to her family and friends to share what had just happened to her at Jacob's Well. (John 4: 27-38) Let us read again from *The Message* translation what happened next:

Many of the Samaritans from that village committed themselves to him because of the woman's witness: "He knew all about the things I did. He knows me inside and out!" They asked him to stay on, so Jesus stayed two days. A lot more people entrusted their lives to him when they heard what he had to say. They said to the woman, "We're no longer taking this on your say-so. We've heard it for ourselves and know it for sure. He's the Savior of the world!" (John 4:39-42, *The Message*)

This beloved woman was not only the first person Jesus revealed himself to as the Messiah, she was also his first evangelist among all the evangelists. She is the first person to link her story with his grace and then share it with her family and friends. Just think about that, before there was Billy Graham, there was a woman at the well.

Back in the 1990's many Christians wore a bracelet that read "WWJD," shorthand for "What would Jesus do?" Today, we read what Jesus did. When he found a woman who believed in the Christ, he empowered her to share his good news. Jesus did not see her from the outside in. Jesus took time to converse with her, and seeing what was in her heart, revealed his identity as the Christ to her. He did not first reveal his true identity to the religious professionals at the Temple, or even the men who were getting him lunch as they traveled. Jesus revealed that he was the Christ to a woman who expected him to some day arrive.

And then as he kept teaching his disciples, he was blessed that she went out and found more folks to believe in him.

Can we do anything less for Christ if we too believe from the inside out?

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://s3.amazonaws.com/e-zekiel/sites/ca20e5d6-0dbc-11e7-b5d2-e11da9054fbc/uploads/files/56876/1678143219710/2023.03.05>

<sup>ii</sup> All Scriptures are copied and pasted from [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)