

Up Close and Personal:  
Jesus and the Samaritan Woman  
John 4:1-30,39-42

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Before I read the text for today, I want to say a word about ancient patriarchal cultures and the role of women. Women were vulnerable, and by necessity, women lived their whole lives under the cover/protection of a man: as a girl, her father; as a wife, her husband. If she was widowed, the practice of levirate marriage came into play in which the nearest male relative—a brother in law—would take her into his household, and in some cases marry her. (Ruth)

Furthermore, women were considered property. They were valued primarily for their ability to produce male offspring, because the ability to pass down one's land/inheritance through male offspring was critical. We saw this in the story of Abraham and Sarah (last fall). Thus, the issue of infertility was often dealt with through having more than one wife. This was common across the board in ancient patriarchal cultures.

Also, there is a long history of bitter enmity between Jews and Samaritans. This is evident in the story of the Good Samaritan—an oxymoron to a Jew because the word "good" and the word "Samaritan" would never, never be in the same sentence! Jews would often take a long circuitous route, to avoid going through Samaria to get to Jericho.

This information provides a backdrop to this up close and personal encounter of the woman at the well with Jesus of Nazareth.

READ JOHN 4:1-30,39-42

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—<sup>2</sup>although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. <sup>3</sup>So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

<sup>4</sup>Now he **had** to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup>So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup>When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" <sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

<sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, “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.)

<sup>10</sup>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>11</sup>“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

<sup>13</sup>Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

<sup>15</sup>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.”

<sup>16</sup>He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

<sup>17</sup>“I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. <sup>18</sup>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.”

<sup>19</sup>“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

<sup>21</sup>“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

<sup>23</sup>Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

<sup>25</sup>The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

<sup>26</sup>Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.

<sup>27</sup>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?”

<sup>28</sup>Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, <sup>29</sup>“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” <sup>30</sup>They came out of the town and made their way toward him....(skip v.31-38)

<sup>39</sup>Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." <sup>40</sup>So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. <sup>41</sup>And because of his words many more became believers.

<sup>42</sup>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."

## PRAY

Jews and Samaritans? Like oil and water. The two didn't mix! As noted, Jews would go the longer route around Samaria in order to get to their destination, and to avoid possible encounters with the Samaritans. So why does John say in verse 3-4: "So Jesus left the Judean countryside and went back to Galilee. To get there, he **had** to pass through Samaria."? No, his GPS map app could have routed him around, the longer way, no problem. It was a common occurrence.

John does not give an explicit reason why Jesus went this way, but I am convinced that it has a connection with John 3:16. If Jesus is going to be the Savior of the "world", then what better way to demonstrate that? He would go to the Samaritans and offer Salvation to them! I believe it was an intentional choice, and you'll see why!

It's high noon at the well in Samaria. Hot. Dry. Little shade. After walking all morning Jesus is tired and thirsty. Hungry too, so he'd sent the disciples ahead to get some food. He's resting alone, when a singular figure approach.

Here she comes, with her water jar perched on her head, or shoulder. With each step she walked, the heat intensified. How far had she come to fetch water? [Did you know that **today** the average woman in rural Africa walks 6 kilometers—approx. 3 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> miles--every day to haul 40 pounds of water? More than 1 out of every 10 people—844 million people today—lack access to basic drinking water!]

Why come at noon? Wouldn't it be better to come when it's cooler, say near dawn or dusk? Some commentators imply that she comes at midday in order to avoid the crowds, and the gossip that surely must arise in her presence. She has a reputation. But it may not be what you think. (More about that in a moment!)

Jesus initiates the conversation by asking for a drink of water. Now her mind is spinning. She expresses surprise that he speaks to her at all (v 9) and when the disciples return, they too have the same question in their minds (v.27). Her surprise is two-fold: Men and women did not socialize in public, and Jews and Samaritans certainly did not!

But this simple request becomes a launch pad for a life changing discussion. It starts with actual physical water but shifts to a discussion of living water. She brings up the proper location of worship, Jesus transitions to the nature of worship, “in spirit and truth”.

The woman is religious but not spiritual (which is the opposite of what we find today--many folks consider themselves “spiritual but not religious”). She shares some similarities with Nicodemus—an interest in religious things, and she tends to be a literal thinker.

**Unlike** Nicodemus, she encounters Jesus, midday in a public place, whereas Nicodemus approached Jesus in private, at night. She’s not a legal scholar like Nicodemus, but quite knowledgeable about her religious tradition.

The entire encounter turns on Jesus’ command (v. 16): “Go, call your husband and come back.”

Oops! Now this is an “oops” in more ways than one.

Whatever Jesus intends, his comment hits very close to home. It is “up close and very personal” for this woman. But the second “oops” may be our understanding of her having had 5 husbands and the one with whom she now lives is not her husband. Is she a prostitute or adulteress as some claim? Doubtful.

Nowhere does Jesus get explicit about sin, relative to these numerous “husbands”. (If you recall in the episode with the woman caught in adultery, he tells her to “go and sin no more”. In other words, Jesus is not afraid to confront sin directly and tell people to repent or change their ways.) It might well be that due to abandonment, death/Levirate marriage/divorce (which was allowed and initiated by husbands) she might have been a victim of a series of unfortunate events that resulted in her being in this very vulnerable situation. Rather than scandalous, her situation might in fact be tragic.

Immediately after Jesus describes her past, she says, “I see that you are a prophet”. “*Seeing*” in John’s Gospel is often connected with belief. When the woman says, “I see you are a prophet,” she is making a confession of faith.

Something remarkable has happened here: Jesus has “seen” her. He has seen her plight — of dependence, not immorality. He has recognized her, spoken with her, offered her something of incomparable worth. He has *seen* her — she exists for him, has worth, value, significance and all of this is treatment to which she is unaccustomed....When he speaks of her past both knowingly and compassionately, she realizes she is in the presence of a prophet. (David Lose, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/misogyny-moralism-and-the\\_b\\_836753](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/misogyny-moralism-and-the_b_836753))

Now she is able to risk raising the central question that has divided Samaritans and Jews for centuries, and that which gets to the core of what separates her from Jesus. When Jesus surprises her with an answer—revealing to her his own identity—*in that moment, she sees him!* In doing so, she leaves her water jar behind to go and tell her neighbors about this man. This woman, whom many would pass by as irrelevant and insignificant, a nobody—becomes the first evangelist! She is a bold witness, telling everyone who will listen, about this Jesus, this Messiah, whom she has encountered. This Jewish man has really ‘seen’ her!

He sees you and me too!

At the heart of faith sharing, is a simple invitation to come to Jesus himself: “Come and see!” It is simple and effective. The towns people do so. They invite Jesus to stay and in the next 48 hours, many more come to believe! They heard for themselves, and put their faith in Christ, confessing:” ...we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.” (v.42)

What tips the scale for this woman, is the fact that Jesus “sees” her: he takes her seriously, he treats her with compassion and dignity, knowing her brokenness. And in those moments, the woman “sees” Jesus as the Messiah!

This ability, “to see” one another, is key to all of our relationships. We first observed this in our series on peacemaking, when Jacob “sees” in Esau his brother, “the face of God” (Genesis 33:10). That same dynamic is at work in this passage. It is integral to this passage in John 4 as well.

The people of the town “see” that this woman is different, changed. Naturally they are curious about what has affected her transformation. They are eager to meet Jesus and they want to “see” the one who has made this difference!

This is no chance encounter. Jesus is intentional about going to Samaria, about breaking rules of culture and tradition in order to share the life-giving living water that only he can give! This thirsty woman drinks her fill, and overflows with the good news of love and acceptance that Christ offers. May we do the same, inviting others to “come and see” and have their deepest thirst and needs completely satisfied!

Pray!