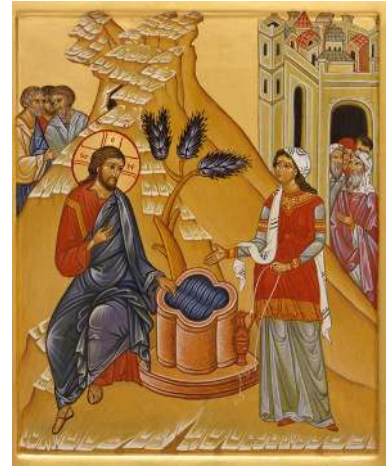


Thru the Bible: Gospel of John: 4:1-45



Jesus and the Woman at the Well: Introduction: (4:1-6): Following Jesus' first Passover visit (Jn. 2), and his encounter with the Pharisee Nicodemus (Jn. 3), he and his disciples start the three day journey back to Galilee, traveling through the region of Samaria. John's comment that Jesus was baptizing more disciples than John the Baptist ties back to 3:22-30, and illustrates the Baptist's final statement that Jesus "*must increase and I must decrease*" (3:30). The gospel writer sets the scene for us when Jesus stops around noon near the Samaritan city of Sychar at Jacob's Well and is left alone while his disciples seek out provisions at the nearest town (4:8).

Geographical and Religious Background:

- ❖ Origin and history of Samaria and Samaritans: **2 Kings 17**
- ❖ Animosity between Jews and Samaritans over the rebuilding of the Temple: **Ezra 4**
- ❖ Samaritans in the Gospel of Luke and Acts: **Luke 9:51-56; 10:10:25-37; 17:11-19; Acts 1:8; 8:25; cf. 11:19-21**

"Two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people: Those who live in Seir, and the Philistines, and the foolish people that live in Shechem" Sirach 50:25-26 "Rabbi Eliezer used to say: 'He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine'" m. Sheb. 8.10; 'The daughters of the Samaritans are deemed unclean as menstruants from the cradle' m. Nid. 4.1

Scene One: The Gift of Living Water (4:7-15): The three sections of John's narrative break down into 3 scenes, which each have a central physical image which prepares for a spiritual theme: well water vs. living water; temple worship vs. worship in Spirit and truth; and agricultural harvest vs. a harvest of people. Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman is the longest dialogue between Jesus and others in all four gospels.

1. An unusual encounter: a Jewish Rabbi and Samaritan woman (4:7-9): "*Jews and Samaritans do not share things in common*"

"These are those who can be put away without their dowry...a wife that goes out in the street with her hair unbound...or speaks with any man" m. Ket. 6.6; "He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself...and at last will inherit Gehenna" m. Aboth 1.5

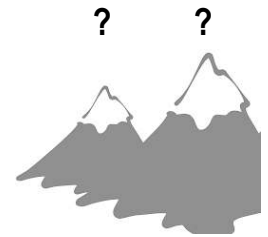
2. An unusual offer: the living water of eternal life (4:10-14): In John's gospel Jesus often employs words with double meanings which often confuses his dialogue partners, yet seeks to move them from a limited earthly perspective to a fresh understanding of fundamental spiritual realities. A good example in the previous chapter is the use of the Greek word *anōthen* in the story of Nicodemus. The word can mean "born *again*" or "born *from above*" (3:4, 7), and this confuses Nicodemus. In the same way in our story "*living water*" was a term used for *fresh* or *running water* in contrast to standing or well water, and the woman cannot comprehend that Jesus is speaking about a different kind of life-giving water to satisfy another kind of thirst. She's excited about a lifetime supply of Sparkletts! So what does Jesus (and John) mean by this "living water"?

a. John as the 'Gospel of the Spirit': The answer to that question is found a few chapters later when Jesus, on the last day of the great Festival of Tabernacles, announces, "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water. Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified*" (Jn. 7:37-39)



b. Biblical echoes and allusions: As often in John, the language and imagery Jesus uses would be familiar to his hearers/readers from their knowledge of scripture. **Jer. 2:13** describes Yahweh as "*the fountain of living water*" and **Isaiah 55:1** states, "*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.*" **Rev. 22:17** then ties all these themes together, "*The Spirit and the bride say 'come'...whoever is thirsty, let them come; and whoever wishes, let them take the free gift of the water of life.*"

Scene Two: The Nature of True Worship (4:16- 26): The conversation takes an abrupt turn when Jesus ignores her question and asks her to go and bring her husband back. This leads to the revelation that she has had five husbands and is now living with a sixth man, and the woman perceives that Jesus may be a prophet. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' omniscience is accented more than in the other gospels, with John preparing for this idea earlier in chapter 2, "*[Jesus] knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone*" (2:24-25). For her part the woman does what anyone would do when faced with an embarrassing personal disclosure: *change the subject!*



1. The debate over the proper place of worship (4:20-22): With the phrase, “*Our fathers worshipped on this mountain,*” the woman enters into a longstanding disagreement between Jews and Samaritans, based not only on history, but also on the interpretation and translation of the Law of Moses (Torah). She is clearly well-versed in her own religious tradition. Jesus’ response of “Salvation is from the Jews” is an important reminder of the wider biblical story of redemption, which centers on Israel’s vocation to be a “light to the nations” and is illustrated even in Jesus’ initial focus on his own people in the Gospels, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and **enter no town of the Samaritans**, but go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 10:5-6; cf. 15:24).

2. Worship in Spirit and truth (4:23-24): With the phrase, “*the hour is coming, and is now here*’ Jesus is anticipating his own death and resurrection and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Worship is not about “place” but “presence” and based on the unchangeable nature of God as “spirit.”

“Christ’s point is that while man, being ‘flesh’, can only be present in one place at a time, God, being ‘spirit’, is not limited. God is non-material, non-corporeal, and therefore non-localised. Thus...the true condition of acceptable worship is not that your feet should be standing in either Jerusalem or Samaria, or anywhere else for that matter, but that your heart should be receptive and responsive to his revelation.”
J. I. Packer, Knowing God, 109

3. The revelation of Jesus as Messiah (4:25-26): Moving from her recognition of Jesus as a prophet, she now introduces the topic of the expected Messiah, to which Jesus responds, “**I am [ego eimi], the one speaking to you**”

Scene Three: Reaping the Harvest (4:27-45): In a real life illustration of the Synoptic parable of the Sower and the Seed, Jesus uses this encounter to teach the disciples about discerning spiritual hunger and anticipating unexpected mission opportunities in unlikely places with unlikely people.

1. Return of the disciples (4:27-34): “*I have food to eat that you don’t know about*”



2. Reaping and harvesting (4:35-38): “*See how the fields are ripe for harvesting*”

3. The response of the Samaritan village: “*We know that this is truly the Savior of the world*”

Application: This important passage and encounter obviously has several possible aspects of relevance and challenge for us today. I will focus on two:

1. Worship in ‘spirit and in truth’: In contrast to the stratified limitations of the Jerusalem temple, through Jesus and the Spirit, our access to the direct presence of God the Father will be unrestrained and unlimited, no longer determined by the physical boundaries of man-made temples or buildings. True worship cannot be bound by place or time or structure, or any outward forms. It is not limited to traditional expressions or rituals: bringing the right sacrifice, reciting the correct creed, or singing certain types of songs. True worship is (and always has been) an attitude of the heart (Ps. 51:16-19; Micah 6:8; 1 Sam. 16:7).

2. Mission and peacemaking: Loving our enemies: Despite 700 years of racial bias and animosity, Jesus was *compelled* by divine necessity (“he *had* to go” 4:4) to enter into “enemy territory” and bring the good news to those considered “lost causes” by others. In transcending boundaries of religion, politics, gender and marital ethics, he challenges us to consider our own fears, biases and racial stereotypes in order to “break down the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph.2:14) and fulfill his calling to mirror the reconciling nature of God, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God*” Mt.5:9

“When an immigrant resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the immigrant. The immigrant who resides among you shall be to you **as the citizen** among you; you are to **love the immigrant as yourself**; for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” Lev. 19:33-34