

WELL WOMEN
John 4:5-30, 39-42

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When it comes to finding a woman in the Bible, you might just look around a well. All the way back in Genesis 24, Eliezer, is looking for a wife for his patriarch Abraham's son, Isaac; he comes to the city of Nahor at "the time when women go out to draw water" (Genesis 24:11). The servant asks a young lady (Rebecca) if he might have a drink from her jar, and she says, "Not only shall you drink from my jar, but your camels need water as well." That was the divine sign that she was the wife for Isaac. The one who would water the camels.

You only have to go a few chapters over until you find another woman at the well. In Genesis 29, Jacob meets Rachel at the well as she arrives to water her father Laban's sheep. Rachel was a shepherdess taking care of her father's flock. Jacob helps her roll away the stone that covers the mouth of the well, helping Rachel water the sheep.

Next is Exodus 2 when Moses is on the run from Pharaoh, who seeks to take his life. Moses comes to the land of Midian and sits down by a well, and 7 daughters arrive eager to water their father's flock. But some bully shepherds of another flock refuse to wait for their turn to water water and drive the daughters away. Moses comes to the rescue, defends the daughters, and draws water for the girls and their flock. One of the girls was named Zipporah, and Moses takes her to be his wife.

Or in 1 Samuel 9, Saul meets young women who are their way to draw water while he was searching for his daddy's donkeys.

And don't forget, even earlier than these well women, Hagar and her son, Ishmael, are cast in the wilderness of Beersheba and perishing from thirst, but "God opens her eyes and she sees a well of water." (Genesis 21:19)

So no reader of scripture should be surprised that Jesus finds an important woman at the well. It was the daily task of women to go and draw water from the well for the well-being of their families.

I want us to notice a few things about this meeting at the well between a rabbi and a woman in John 4. Jesus had been to Jerusalem earlier in the gospel of John, and now he's traveling north back to Galilee. It says in verse 4, "And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a city of Samaria called Sychar near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. And Jacob's well was there; therefore, Jesus, being weary from his journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour." That would be noon.

The first thing I want you to notice is that

I. Jesus and the woman were both keeping divine appointments.

I ask you this morning, “Who keeps your calendar?” Jesus’ thirst is real; he needs a refreshing drink of water. Remember, the Word became flesh, and moved into our neighborhood which means he experienced weariness, fatigue and was in dire need of the refreshment of fresh water.

Unlike Nicodemus in the previous chapter (3) who came under the cover of the shadows of night, this woman comes at high noon. Archaeological finds suggest that there were other wells closer to the woman’s home, so why does she travel this distance alone at this uncomfortable hour, the blazing heat of high noon? The reality is the same Spirit that is driving Jesus to take a seat at that well to quench his thirst was, likewise, sending the woman to meet Jesus for a divine appointment with eternal consequences.

Look back at verse 4; Jesus “had to pass through Samaria.” Now many, if not most Jews would never go to Samaria, for Jews were enemies of the Samaritans. There’s a long history of hatred and disdain between the two peoples. The Jews actually saw Samaritans as worse than Gentiles, so Jews traveled around the city of Samara.

Jesus, however, is compelled by the Spirit of God to travel directly through Samaria to sit at the well, for he has a divine appointment with the woman who would become one of the earliest proclaimers of the gospel -- the woman at the well. While many Jews traveled east to circumvent Samaria, Jesus “has to” to go through Samaria because God has somebody waiting on him at the well.

The problems between Jews and Samaritans were old. When the king of Assyria defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and captured Samaria around 722 BC, he deported the leading Israelites to Assyria. Samaria (northern Israel) was resettled by foreigners who, eventually, worshipped both the God of Israel, but their own gods, as well.

After the Jews returned from their own captivity to Babylon later (538 BC), they saw the Samaritans as half-breeds, aliens, and enemies. The Samaritans didn’t even use the same books of the Bible; they only held to the Torah. While the Samaritans claimed to have a Jewish history, the Jews considered them worse than Gentiles. And when they decided to build their own temple on Mt. Gerizim around 400 BC, the Jews hated it so much, they eventually torched the temple to the ground in 128 BC. Bad blood boiled over between the Jews and the Samaritans.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve discovered my calendar’s confusion comes from my call as pastor; I fill my week up fully, and yet I often operate more like a fireman. The phone rings several times a week for a funeral, a surgery, or another type of emergency. My own planned calendar is most often punted by providence! This week my most important appointment which was not on my calendar was with a person who caught me in passing and was desperate for the good news of the gospel.

I like to wake up every morning and prepare my heart and my mind for the events calendared for the day, only to discover that God’s actually the one keeping my calendar. I just bet he’s keeping

yours too. He was keeping the calendar of the Christ, and, he was keeping the calendar of the woman headed to the well. Their divine appointments had collided as providence had planned -- at the well.

Pat and Tina O'Neal have faithfully and fruitfully served God for many years. Over dinner one night, they told of a time when they found themselves stranded in Johannesburg on the way home from a trip to Africa. Their unexpected overnight stay was due to a missed connection outside of their control. Instead of getting upset, they reminded themselves that there are no accidents with God, only appointments. So, wherever they went, they decided to ask people, "Are you the reason we are in South Africa?"

One of the employees at the hotel who was asked the question said, "Maybe? I don't know." The next day, however, as Pat and Tina waited for their evening flight home, they decided to grab a light lunch in a cafe near the hotel. After their lunch had been served, the lady manager came by to see if they were satisfied with the service they had received.

As they responded to the manager's question, they asked her the big question: "Are you the reason we are in South Africa?" In God's good providence, a conversation ensued that provided Pat and Tina a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel with this lady. But that is not the end of the story -- nor the best part of the story. When the manager departed, a waitress approached the O'Neals, and she shared with them that there were a number of Christians in the cafe praying intently for their manager's salvation. Not wanting to get fired or to upset their manager unnecessarily, they had been praying that God would make a way for them to share the gospel with her. From their perspective, that prayer had just been answered, and Pat and Tina just discovered the reason they were in South Africa.

Surely, this story is a reminder that with God there are no accidents, only appointments. It is also a vivid reminder that when it comes to whom, how, and when a person comes to faith in Christ, the testimony of Scripture is that nothing is left to chance. Salvation is of the Lord. It is His gift to give, and the circumstances that lead to that event are also of the Lord (Jonah 2:9; Rev. 7:10). We see that demonstrably in the conversion of the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at the Well of Sychar and takes from Him the living water of the gospel (John 4:1-42). The woman's salvation was divinely orchestrated. (Philip De Courcy, Know the Truth)

II. Secondly, not only do we have divine appointments, but Jesus speaks to all people everywhere.

You can't help but contrast last Sunday's sermon with this Sunday's sermon. John himself puts these two stories -- the one about Nicodemus in chapter 3 beside the one about the woman at the well in chapter 4 -- to shock the reader into coming to the conclusion that this Christ loves everyone.

Could these two characters in John 3 & 4 be any more different? Let's look at the list.

1. He's a man versus she being a woman. (v. 7; cf v. 27)
2. He is named Nicodemus, while she is left nameless.

3. He is a Jew, and not just a Jew, he's a Pharisee, and not just a Pharisee, he's a member of the Jewish high court. She, on the other hand, is a Samaritan, hated by the Jews for a long history of conflict. (v. 7-9)
4. She's certainly no righteous teacher of God's people like Nicodemus. She is a woman with a, perhaps, questionable, and certainly a complicated past, having had 5 husbands and now a live-in boyfriend.
5. He comes to Jesus by night; she comes to Jesus at noon.

From any possible Jewish vantage point, we have gone from the "best of the best," Nicodemus in chapter 3, to the "worst of the worst," the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4. But Jesus loves all people at all times. In fact, interestingly enough, Jesus is much more curt and confrontational with Nicodemus and more patient and kind to the woman at the well.

III. The third thing I want you to see is that all of us need to discover the living water of God (v. 10).

When Jesus arrives at the well thirsty, he asks the woman for a drink. The lady replies, "How do you, being a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink? I'm a Samaritan whom you're supposed to hate, and a woman, whom you're not supposed to converse with because of the cultural barriers between us." And then John explains, "For the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." (v. 9)

Jesus' reply in verse 10 says, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you 'give me a drink,' you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water."

The lady is quite comical in her reply. "Let me get this straight, Sir, you don't even have a bucket with which to draw the water, and this well is really deep. You're asking me for water, but now you're offering me 'living water.' You know this is a well where Jacob himself drank; he watered his cattle here. You're not greater than Jacob in that you require better water than Jacob's well water, are you?"

Of course, as readers of the text, we know that Jesus is better than Jacob. He's the Christ.

Jesus replies, "Everyone who drinks of this well water shall thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I give him shall never thirst, for the water that I give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." (vs. 13-14)

The woman says to him, "Sir, give me this water so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw water."

Back in Jesus' day, you got water in either one of two ways. You either collected rainwater in an underground tank called a cistern, or you drew water from a well or a stream. Of the two, living water, freshly flowing stream or well water, was much preferred. Water from a cistern tasted old and stagnant. It would keep the body and soul together in a time of drought all right, but everyone preferred the fresh water the women carried up in their clay jars from the well in the town square.

Living water in John's gospel means the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, living water is sometimes associated with Yahweh Himself. He's call the fountain of living waters in Jeremiah 2:13 or 17:13. Or in Isaiah we read, "Ho, everyone that thirsts, come to the waters (Isaiah 55:1). Or there's the waters that issue from the temple in Ezekiel's vision (47:1-12). Or Jehovah, Yahweh, is the fountain of life in Psalm 36:9.

The woman, at first, seems defensive, declaring that she is happy with her patriarchal well, Jacob's well. How dare a stranger claim to provide anything better than the patriarch?

I'm reminded of this same author, John, who wrote the book of Revelation. In chapter 21, he describes the new heaven and new earth when the kingdom of God is the same on earth as it is in heaven. A renewal of all of creation. After giving that redeemed vision of no more death, no more crying, and no more pain, he says, "It is done. I'm the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and I will give to the one who thirsts the spring of the water of life without cost." A drink from God's well. Not stagnant water, but a fresh spring is part of his kingdom. The Living Water allows sinners to drink from the goblet of God's grace.

The Samaritan woman progressively perceives the identity of the stranger at the well. First, the woman calls Jesus a man, and then when Jesus says, "I know you don't have a husband; you've had five husbands, and the one you're now with is not your husband," she realizes (v. 19) that he is a prophet who sees beyond the surface, the facade.

It was common for commentators from another era to see this lady as "shady," a lady with five husbands and now with a live-in boyfriend. Yes, the old commentators raised their eyebrows about this woman, as if she were some sort of merry divorcee, the Liz Taylor of ancient Samaria, trading husbands like sports cars. But all of their moral umbrage misses the point that women in the first century simply did not have that option. She has not devoured husband after husband; she has been devoured by a social system that for whatever reason has passed her from man to man to man until she no longer even has the dignity of marriage. Women did not choose to divorce in the first century; only men had that right. Jesus is not so much exposing her sin as he is naming her subjection.

With that word, Jesus touched the issue of her life. (Thomas Long, *Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter: Cycle A: Gospel Texts*, page 35)

IV. The last thing I want you to see is: when the woman discovers the Messiah, she leaves her water pot behind (v. 25-29, 39-42).

In verses 20 and following, the lady points out the differences between what the Jews believe and what the Samaritans believe. Remember the disdain and divisions between them. One worships in Jerusalem and the other on Mt. Gerizim. There were rival claims -- the Jews at Jerusalem, and the Samaritans at Gerizim, but Jesus lets her know that genuine worship is spiritual; it's not dependent on a place.

Again, notice the progression of perception. At first, Jesus is just a Sir in verse 11. Then he becomes a prophet showing spiritual insight in verse 19. In verse 25, the woman says, "I know when the Messiah, the one who's the Christ comes, he will declare all things to us."

And then Jesus says to her, "I who speak to you am he." (v. 26)

In verse 29, she declares to the men of Sychar, "This isn't the Christ, is it?" with the implication being, "Yes, He is."

In verse 39, because of her testimony, "Many in the city believed because of the word of the woman when she said, 'This man knows everything about me.'"

The language for "I am he" (v. 26) is the language of the burning bush when God tells Moses, "You tell them I AM who I AM." Like God said to Moses "I AM," identifying himself as the creator of the cosmos, Jesus says to the woman at the well, "I am," identifying himself as the Christ.

This "I am he" is the first of many "I am's" in the Gospel of John where Jesus claims to be God. We will have "I am the bread of life" in chapter 6; "I am the light of the world" in chapter 8; "I am the door" in chapter 10; "I am the good shepherd" in chapter 10; "I am the resurrection and the life" in chapter 11; "I am the way, the truth, and life" in chapter 14; and "I am the true vine" in chapter 15. But it begins right here with "I am he," meaning the Christ.

Notice how the woman responds. The woman left her water jar, went to the city, and said to the men, "Come and see the man who told me all the things I have done. This isn't the Christ, is it?" (vs. 28-29)

Those who follow Jesus always have to leave something behind. She leaves a prized possession, her water jar, behind.

Who else leaves something behind to follow Jesus? John and James leave their nets with their old father, Zebedee, and walk away from the fishing business. Matthew abandons his tax books, gives them over to his junior accountants. The Samaritan woman, like other proclaimers of the gospel, leaves one of her most important possessions, her pot, behind to declare his divinity.

When Jesus confronts you with the truth that He is the Christ, what will you need to leave behind?

Conclusion: First, she caught the sight of a thirsty man. Then she saw him as a Jew, then a rabbi, after that a prophet, and last of all, the Messiah. She tried to get the better of the thirsty man. She showed her dislike for the Jew. She heckled the rabbi. She was swept off her feet by the prophet and adored the Christ. (Leon Morris, page 254.)

Some of you have a divine appointment today. Perhaps Jesus is sitting down at the well this morning next to you. As much as he knew everything about the sinful woman at the well, he knows everything about you, too.

Jesus says to her, “If you only knew who’s really talking to you...” (v. 10). Well, He’s talking to you this morning, too, for the preached word of God is, after all, still the word of God. He offers you living water -- you’ll never thirst again. How about a drink from the goblet of grace? He knows you, yet still loves and calls you.

Additional Resources:

Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*

“The Other Samaritan,” www.homileticsonline.com