

## “Come Thirsty”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 4.1-15

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Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he absolutely had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was finding a seat on the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Please, can you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jewish man, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is asking of you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” 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.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

John 4.1-15

Adapted from the New Revised Standard Version

Jesus goes where he should not have gone. He starts a conversation he should have had. He asks for something we do not expect. He is misunderstood, twice! And he gives exactly what is needed.

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First, Jesus goes where he should not have gone.

He is going home to Galilee, from the region of Judea in the south.<sup>1</sup> The prudent route swings east, across and north along the Jordan River, and then back across into Galilee.

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<sup>1</sup> Was Jesus avoiding dissension between his disciples and those of John the Baptizer? Or, was he concerned that his success was drawing the wrong sort of attention, and too early, from those in religious and political leadership?

That way steers you clear of Samaritans.<sup>2</sup>

Time heals some wounds. Others, it cuts deeper. For five centuries, Jews and Samaritans had been cutting each other.<sup>3</sup> Their ancestry was similar, but different. Their scriptures were similar, but different. They belonged to the same land, but told very different stories of that same land. Although the same in many ways, the differences became decisive. Jews did not trust Samaritans, and avoided them. Samaritans did not trust Jews, and avoided them.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Jesus, a good Jew, “*absolutely had to go through Samaria.*”<sup>5</sup>

Something’s up!

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Then, Jesus starts a conversation he should not have had.

Way back, when father Abraham sent a servant to fetch a wife for Isaac, where did he meet her? A well. Where did Jacob meet Rachel? A well. Where did Moses meet Zipporah? A well.<sup>6</sup> Wells were the ancient eHarmony.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus meets a woman at a well. What do you expect to happen?

Strangely, she comes alone. That is dangerous for her safety and reputation. Strangely, she comes when the day is hottest. That’s not when you trudge to get water. Something is up with her. (We’ll have to come back to that next time.)

A man of honour knows not to talk with a woman in public, especially if she is not family, and most definitely when alone. Both their reputations would be trashed. Seeing her coming, he would move away to give her proper distance.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus does not move. Except to turn. And talk to her! What is he up to?

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus was always a faithful Jew, and observant Jews often circumvented Samaria. Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 236.

<sup>3</sup> For the history of the Samaritan-Jewish conflict, see the accounts in Bruner 255f and Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Woman at the Well” in *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2008), 203ff.

<sup>4</sup> Tragically, this same land continues to be a place of mistrust, injustice, insecurity and hostility. The site of Sychar is very near Nablus, an important city in the Palestinian West Bank. Also, the illegal Israeli settlement of Har Brakha, and the village of Kiryat Luza, the home of modern-day Samaritans who live a precarious and uncertain existence there.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek word *edei* conveys a strong sense of compulsion. See Bruner, 236.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 24, Genesis 29 and Exodus 2.

<sup>7</sup> An online dating site. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EHarmony>

<sup>8</sup> Bailey, 203f.

She does not leave. She comes closer. What is she up to?

Something's up!

(By the way, there is another story of a woman at a well. Hagar, a slave from Egypt, had belonged to Sarah, was pregnant with Abraham's child, and was cruelly rejected by both of them. She was homeless and lost. Yet by a spring of water, God encountered her. She finally knew God saw her.)<sup>9</sup>

### III

Jesus sees her, this Samaritan woman at this well.

He is thirsty. Those wells did not have buckets; you had to bring your own.<sup>10</sup> Jesus does not have a bucket. So he has to ask. He is dependent on someone coming by. She does. So he asks her.<sup>11</sup>

For the reasons I've already described, she is shocked. And more! I imagine she is used to taking orders from men, but this man asks her. I imagine she expects Jews to sneer at her as she sneers at them, but this Jew asks her, politely.

And because the Gospel-writer John has already told us about Jesus, we are even more surprised when he asks for help. Jesus is God the Word. Through him everything came into being; without him nothing that is could be. *"Please give me a drink of water,"* asks the One who made the water. When she challenges Jesus: *"Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? . . . ."* Well, yes he is.<sup>12</sup> Remember when Jacob rested his head on a stone pillow, and dreamed of a ladder, and saw the LORD at the top. . . . Remember when Jacob wrestled alone with a Stranger, and realized it was the LORD . . . . Jesus the Son who with the Father and the Spirit is the One Lord God, he knew Jacob long before Jacob dug that well.<sup>13</sup>

Now, Jacob's Lord sits on that same well, and asks for water.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 16.

<sup>10</sup> Bailey, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Bruner, 245.

<sup>12</sup> Reflection on her challenge, Bruner writes, *"Yes, the incarnate Lord does think so. He made Jacob."* Bruner, 250.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 28.10-22 and 32.24-32.

<sup>14</sup> I hear something in this for us who follow Jesus. As churches, we are used to having stuff for people. *"Come to us, and we'll help you. Come to us, and we'll bless you. Come to us. . . ."* Daniel Niles, a theologian from Sri Lanka, says of Jesus:

*"He was a true servant because He was at the mercy of those whom He came to serve. . . . This weakness of Jesus, we His disciples must share. To serve from a position of power is not true service but beneficence. . . . The only way to build love between two people or two groups of people is to be so related to each other as to stand in need of each other. The Christian community must serve. It must also be in a position where it needs to be served."* [Quoted in Bailey, 203f.]

#### IV

Then, because he is her Lord also, and ours too, Jesus offers a drink. Living Water.

Living water is simply spring water that is flowing and fresh. Contrast it with water gathered and stored in a cistern.<sup>15</sup> Living water freshens. Living water moves. So it became a way to talk about much deeper things. Living Water is the Torah: God's Word, God's Story, God's Way that makes God's People. Tell it and teach it, and you are giving Living Water, flowing and fresh.<sup>16</sup> The prophet Jeremiah calls God the "fountain of living waters," and grieves that the people have rejected the Fountain, for leaky cisterns they have dug themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Now Jesus says he is the Word, the Story, the Way. If only she knew, she would ask. He is the Fountain from whom the Living Water flows. If only she knew, she would ask.

Ask. Ask! If only she would ask. If only we ask, he will give. Just ask. It's free. He'll give. Just ask.

She doesn't get it. Of course not. She thinks he is still talking about the well, and he has no bucket, and it is deep. You can almost hear her laughing at him. You can almost see Jesus smiling at her.

#### V

So again, Jesus invites her to ask. He invites us too. Well water, tap water, river water, bottled water . . . drink even the best water, and your mouth will be dry again. Drink the Living Water Jesus gives, and you will not thirst.

Oh, be sure you will always thirst for God, always want more of God, never be fully satisfied. But the Living Water will never run out, never be out of reach.<sup>18</sup>

This Living Water is the Holy Spirit, you see. God the Spirit, God's sparkling, bubbling, cascading presence. When the landscape that is your life has become parched with drought, the Spirit flows to spring up in you a garden of life. When a grimy, hard crust has formed on your soul from all the hurts you've caused, and damage you've done, and hatred you've harboured, and love you've withheld, the Spirit flows, scrubs and softens you.

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Is Jesus is calling us to be like him, and go to others? Not from a position of strength, but weakness. With something to give, yes! We represent Jesus! Yet like Jesus, with needs also. Might God be humbling once-rich, formerly-powerful, used-to-be-important, now-less-popular churches, so we can follow Jesus more closely? Might God be taking away our buckets, so we need to rely on others?

<sup>15</sup> W. Bauer, quoted in Bruner, 256.

<sup>16</sup> Bruner, 253.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremiah 2.13.

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin wrote, "[Jesus] does not mean that we drink so that we are fully satisfied from the very first day, but only that the Holy Spirit is a constantly flowing well. So there is no danger of those who are renewed by spiritual grace becoming dry." Quoted in Bruner, 256.

Jesus promises more. The Spirit whom he flows into you will become a fountain from you. (Later, we'll see how this happens in this woman.) The Spirit is for you. And the Spirit is in you, so you can show Jesus for others.

## VI

She doesn't get all that. Again, she misunderstands. She just wants an endless magical drink, so she won't have to come to that well any more. (Remember, she came alone, at a time of day when she can avoid people. Coming to the well reminds her of some wound. We'll have to look at that, next time.)

She doesn't have a full understanding of God. She doesn't know who Jesus is. She doesn't know the salvation he offers. She doesn't know about the Holy Spirit. She isn't interested in being a fountain for others. She is deficient in her theology, her Christology, her soteriology, her pneumatology, and her missiology. All she does is ask. She finally asks.

And Jesus gives. To people who don't "get it," Jesus gives the Spirit.

Jesus has gone where he should not have gone, to those Samaritans. Jesus has started a conversation he should not have had, with a woman at a well. He has asked for water he should not have needed, for he is the Lord of all creation. All so she can ask for what he knows she really needs. She finally asks.

And Jesus gives. There is no place you can find yourself, where he will not come to you. There is no taboo which he will not transgress, to come to you.

Dale Bruner says, "*Jesus' promises are for problematic people.*"<sup>19</sup>

Like us! Amen!

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<sup>19</sup> Bruner, 250. More wonderful quotes from Bruner: "*The gospel is for admitted failures, for confessed incompetents, in short, for people like all of us when we are honest.*" [250] "*Even when our faith is weak and our asking is not entirely right or not even quite orthodox, Jesus still keeps his promise—if you just ask, I will give—and he straightens her and us out later.*" [252]