

## **“Worship for Wounds”**

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 4.3-26

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Jesus 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.”

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you people say that the place where people absolutely must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we know, for real salvation comes from the Jewish people. However, the hour is coming—indeed, it is right now!—when the true worshippers will be worshipping the Father by means of Spirit and Truth. You see, the Father is actively seeking exactly such people to be the people worshipping him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him absolutely must worship by means of Spirit and Truth.”

The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called “The Anointed One”). “When he comes, he will explain all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I who am speaking to you . . . I AM.”

John 4.3-26

Adapted from the New Revised Standard Version

I

Calling her “the woman at the well” becomes a mouthful. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, she is Saint Photina, which means “Luminous One.”<sup>1</sup> So let’s call her “Dawn.”

Jesus promises to Dawn “living water.” He means the rushing and flowing Holy Spirit, who is the life-giving and renewing energetic presence of God. Flowing water exposes the roots of trees growing along its banks. Giving her Living Water, Jesus is exposing Dawn’s roots.<sup>2</sup> Few of us want our roots exposed. But we can trust Jesus to do it.

Dawn’s been married five times. Five times! Maybe she’s been widowed. Maybe she’s been divorced; only husbands could decide to divorce back then. Divorce and/or death has wounded Dawn, five times? What has that done to her? Each time a wound like that is opened, the cut is deeper, the healing slower, the scar more unsightly. She has another guy now, but he won’t marry her. Maybe he’s married to someone else. But he is all she can get. In her culture, no husband means no status, no protection.

I imagine after her first, the neighbours shared her sorrow. Same with the second, because life happens. But then Third? And Fourth? They pulled back. Fewer invitations. Move away when they saw her coming. Fifth. And now, Mr. Sort-of-Sixth.

I get it now, why Dawn’s coming to the well alone. And in the middle of the day. When others stay away from the heat, she comes to this lonely place, to get away from the cold of shame. Shame says “I’m broken.” Shame says, “Something is wrong with me!” Shame says, “I am good for nothing, for no one.”<sup>3</sup> These days, social media adds extra dimensions to the piling on of shame.<sup>4</sup> But that message is nothing new, that you’re nothing, you’re a waste, you’re damaged goods.

Jesus knows Dawn’s wound. He exposes her roots. But he pounds no pulpit, gives no lecture. He sticks with her. He stays in the conversation, because Dawn matters. She is worth it! So are you.

II

Give her credit. She stays in the conversation too. That says something about what it is like to be with Jesus. Still, Dawn does try to steer it away. Jesus is obviously a prophet. So instead of her sexual history, let’s talk about something safe. Religion.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritan\\_woman\\_at\\_the\\_well](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritan_woman_at_the_well)

<sup>2</sup> “The water of life was flowing over her, and, like the water of a stream that exposes the roots of a tree growing on its banks, her roots were exposed.” 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>3</sup> For an excellent introduction to shame, and its modern epidemic, see Brené Brown’s TED talk, “Listening to Shame.” [www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame?language=en)

<sup>4</sup> CBC’s *The National* just aired a report about the effects shaming on social media can have on its victims. [www.cbc.ca/player/News/TV%20Shows/The%20National/ID/2667068497/](http://www.cbc.ca/player/News/TV%20Shows/The%20National/ID/2667068497/) See also Andy Crouch, “The Return of Shame,” Christianity Today 59.2 (March 2015): 32-41.

Jesus follows her lead. She is steering in the right direction. If you've got a wound, you need it healed. God heals. That's what temples are for.<sup>5</sup> But, that topic opens another deep wound.

A bit of history.<sup>6</sup> After King Solomon, Israel split into two hostile nations. The northern tribes continued to be called Israel, and the southern ones, Judah. In 722 B.C., the vicious Assyrians crushed Israel, and scattered those 10 northern tribes throughout their empire. They colonized the area with foreigners, perhaps from Mesopotamia or Arabia. Any northern Jews who remained eventually intermarried with these outsiders. Their descendants were the Samaritans.

Two centuries later, Judah in the south endured its own defeat and exile, this time by the Babylonians. When those exiles returned generations later, there were the Samaritans, living in the land, claiming it as their own, and hostile.

Samaritans and Jews were similar, but different. Samaritans saw themselves as the true descendants of Israel. Jews saw Samaritans as foreign Gentiles. Jews and Samaritans both followed the Torah (the five books of Moses). Jews also honoured the Writings and the Prophets. Samaritans had their own version of the Torah, and accused the Jewish version of being false and corrupted.

Their hostility focused on their competing temples. Jews worshipped at the rebuilt Temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. Samaritans worshipped at their Temple on Mount Gerizim. A few of generations before Jesus, Jews destroyed the Samaritan Temple. Just before Jesus' birth, Samaritans got revenge by defiling the Jewish Temple during Passover.

Samaritans and Jews both worshipped the Lord, and hated each other. It was a well-aged bitterness, five centuries of accusation and reprisals.

Does this sound a bit familiar? Vicious and ancient hostility inflicting wounds in that small stretch of land.

Today, the site of the long-destroyed Jewish Temple is the Muslim *Haram al-Sharif*. For millennia, Mount Zion has been a place of worship. Now, it's the most explosive flashpoint

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<sup>5</sup> Lesslie Newbigin wrote: "[Jesus] has done what true prophets have always done—exposed the sin which sin itself seeks to hide. . . . Where sin has been exposed one must ask about the possibility of atonement, or forgiveness. A prophet can bring no healing if the ministry of the priest is not available, if there is no 'mercy seat' where sacrifice can be accepted and sin put away. Where is that mercy seat, that true temple, where true worship may be offered by consciences cleansed from sin? Is it on Mount Zion as Jews believe, or on Mount Gerizim where the Samaritans worship? This is . . . the proper pressing of the question which must be asked when sin has been brought to the light and exposed." Quoted in Bailey, 209.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert T. Anderson, "Samaritans" in David Noel Freedman (ed), The Anchor Bible Dictionary (New York: Doubleday 1992): vol 5, pp. 941-47, and also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritans>

in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Today, the site of the long-destroyed Samaritan Temple, Mount Gerizim, overlooks the Palestinian city of Nablus.<sup>8</sup> Nearby is the Israeli settlement of Har Brakha. Also, Kiryat Luza, home to about half of the few Samaritans who are left.<sup>9</sup>

And, in Nablus today is that same ancient well, where Jesus the Jew met a Samaritan woman.

### III

They talked about worship.

Dawn steered the conversation to worship to avoid talking about her wound—her five-plus-one husbands. Jesus followed her, because worshipping in God's presence heals wounds.

Talking about worship and temples is searingly hostile ground between their two peoples. Hostility wounds us. Living in a community where grievance and injustice flow poisonously makes deep wounds. Dawn has gone from one wound, her marriage heartbreaks, to another, her nation's hostility.

She does some theology. *"Where is the presence of God?"* That's what a temple is all about, a sacred place where God's presence is. *"Where? You Jews say Jerusalem. We Samaritans say here, on this mountain."*

Imagine, worship dividing people! Where is God's presence: in stirring hymns or energetic praise choruses? Any disagreements about the music we sing? Which spirituality is superior: Mennonite, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Anglican? Much blood has spilled over that one. Should we stay Presbyterian or become United? Families split over that. Many wounds!

Where can we find God? How can we find God?

### IV

While we're busy looking, and quarrelling, and wounding . . . God finds us.

Jesus says, to Dawn and to us, God seeks people for worship. In Spirit and in Truth, says Jesus who is the Truth. The Living Truth-Son floods us with the Living Water-Spirit. The Truth and Spirit make us into people who worship the Father.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple\\_Mount](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_Mount)

<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Gerizim](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Gerizim)

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritans#Modern\\_times](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritans#Modern_times)

<sup>10</sup> "The old mistaken interpretation of this verse put the words 'spirit and truth' in the lower case and said that the words meant worshipping 'inwardly and without outward forms.' No! Spirit, *pneuma* in the Gospel of John, is in its majority usage not our 'inwardness' but the reality of the Holy Spirit. And 'truth' in the Gospel

God does this. God seeks us.<sup>11</sup> Us who are wounded! Which is all of us. Us who are wounding! All of us. God seeks us for worship.

When we worship God, when our eyes are on God, how we see everything else changes.

You know when you take a photograph, and the frame has things that are close, and things that are further back, it's hard to focus. When you focus on one object, the others become blurry, out of focus. But if you focus on them, then the first object becomes out of focus.

When we worship, our focus is on God. But it's the opposite of photography. When we focus on God, everything else becomes more focused.

When we are worshipping—bringing ourselves to God, giving our love and devotion to God, sharing our wonders and our wounds with God—when we worship, God becomes clearer. And everything else becomes clearer too.

Including our wounds. Including ourselves who are wounded. Including those who have wounded us. Focus on God, and see them and yourself, more clearly.

See that you are not worthless, shameful. Because you belong to God, who seeks you, the Living Water, who cleanses you, the Living Truth, who saves you when you come to the well.

See that they are wounded too. And let God fill your heart with love and healing grace for them.

Should we worship here or there, this way or that way? Sure. As long as you're worshipping God, focusing on God, those other things become clearly less-important.

Dawn's story isn't finished yet. As Jesus fills her with Living Water, he will sweep her out. Because God is still seeking. Seeking the wounded, and wounders. (That's next week.)

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of John is not one of Plato's Forms or Ideas; no, it is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ." Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 263. Bruner then quotes two very different biblical scholars: "Today most exegetes agree that in proclaiming worship in Spirit and truth, Jesus is not contrasting external worship with internal worship. His statement has nothing to do with worshipping God in the inner recesses of one's own spirit; for the Spirit is the Spirit of God, not the spirit of man, as vs. 24 makes clear" (Raymond Brown, 269); Bultmann: "truth is not the teaching about God transmitted by Jesus but is God's very reality revealing itself — occurring! — in Jesus." (Rudolph Bultmann, 269).

<sup>11</sup> Two more quotes by Dale Bruner: "We do not bring people to a passive God. The living God is actively and urgently at work in the world — Father, Son, and Spirit. . . . this living God is actively seeking true worshipers" and "Worship is only secondarily and reflexively humans seeking God; it is, first of all and creatively, the divine Father, through Jesus the Truth, by the Fountain Spirit — the one God seeking humans and moving them upward to him." [Bruner 263f.]