

Lent 3—"Woman at the Well"
March 19, 2017
Text: John 4:5-26 (27-42)

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
Third Sunday in Lent

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 sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "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 Jew, 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 saying to 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 back."

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 worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people 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 worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is

coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Introduction—The Encounter

"Give me a drink." This request from a weary traveller to a woman at a well is what begins this encounter in the Gospel of John.

The setting is Samaria. Everybody knows, if you are a Jew, you just don't go there. But Jesus and his disciples are traveling back to Galilee and they happen into this potentially hostile territory somewhere in the vicinity of Mount Gerizim, to a place called Sychar where you find Jacob's Well.

Jesus comes to this 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, sits by the well. It is about noon.

And when a Samaritan woman comes to draw water, Jesus says to her, "Give me a drink."

She knows the boundaries, she has suspicions. Her purpose on this day is to get water and carry it home. This man is an obstacle. She says,

"How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Because, as the writer of the Gospel notes, Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

Thirst

There's thirst. And then, there's a deeper thirst. And Jesus is going to take this encounter to another level quickly. He says,

"If you knew the gift of God, and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

She stays right with him and says, *"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 says 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."

She says, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus says to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."
And now, it gets interesting.

The woman answers him, "I have no husband." This is a woman with a story. But it's Jesus who tells it to her.

The Truth

He says, "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 truth. Somehow he knows her and all about her life; her past and present. But he recognizes something very special in her. She is someone who speaks the truth.

"Sir, I see that you are a prophet.

Then *she* raises the stakes of the conversation, and brings up the long and bitter history between the Samaritans and the Jews,

"Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

This theme of truth surfaces often in the Gospel of John, and in John's account of Jesus's trial Pilate asks him,

"So you are a king?"

Jesus answers, *"You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."*

Pilate asks him, "What is truth?"

The question remains with humanity all through history; even to this today. Especially today. We all wrestle with the concept of truth, and truth these days is hard to find. What is authentic? What is real? We look out into the world and wonder what in the world is *true*. But, so too, and even more importantly, we look inward and wonder the same about ourselves. Who am I? What do I really believe? And what lengths am I willing to go to authentically live that out? What is truth?

John 8:31-32 Jesus says, *"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free."*

If there is one thing shared in common between the Samaritans and the Jews of the first century, it is this: They are both waiting for the Messiah.

Back at the well, the woman says to Jesus, *"I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."*

Jesus says to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Food and Harvest

And now things begin to shift. This story continues in the fourth chapter of John. The once thirsty woman leaves her water jar at the well and goes back to the city, and the hungry disciples come back from the city after getting food.

They say to Jesus, "Rabbi, eat something."

But he says to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."

So the disciples say to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?"

Jesus says to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work."

And then, as usual, Jesus uses the opportunity to teach the disciples something—something about evangelism:

Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

See for Yourself

Meanwhile, the Samaritan woman says to her people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They leave the city and go to him. Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."

The woman with a story is telling a new story now. Her life is changed and suddenly, there is a new purpose. (What is evangelism?) Hear the good news: that through Jesus, God is changing the stories of all our lives!

And then something amazing happens:

When the Samaritans come to him, they ask him to stay with them; and he stays with them for two days. And many more believe because of his word.

It's happening. The Gospel has begun to spread outside of Jerusalem, outside of Judea, into Samaria, and soon to the rest of the world. For the Samaritans to ask a Jew to stay with them, to eat with them, and simply be with them, means that hell has frozen over. Healing and reconciliation is possible and has now begun. It has started on the word of woman who encounters the Living God and then speaks the truth.

But they say to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

"Truly the savior of the world," they say. Fading, perhaps, are strongly held positions of where and how one does their religion, as they are now willing to make a home in the truth of Jesus the Christ.

What Is Your Story, What Is Your Song?

It is the third Sunday in Lent. There's a thirst that drives us in this season. It's a thirst leads us to come and see Jesus for ourselves. Encounters with God happen at the well of Living Water. It's there we witness the truth, our lives become known, our stories get changed, and our purpose becomes clear. What is your story? What is your song? Amen.