

John 4:3-42: **Living Water**

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, TN

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Our gospel reading contains more verses than we usually hear in worship. So good news: today you get more Jesus, less preacher.

I've asked [Megan](#) to read with me to help us grasp the conversational nature of this passage.

So settle in, let your ears fall open, and listen for God's word from the Gospel of John, chapter 4 (NRSV):

Now Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he 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 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...the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?'

Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.'

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

So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?'

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

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.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

And many more believed because of his word. They said 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.'

Geographically, Jesus did not have to go through Samaria. Traveling from Judea north to Galilee, Jews typically took other routes to avoid Samaria. So our gospel writer implies that spiritually, missionally, Jesus had to go through Samaria. Last week Megan preached about Jesus telling Nicodemus that God so loved the world, the whole cosmos. Turns out Samaria is part of God's beloved world.

Ancient Jacob's Well, where Jesus rests and meets this Samaritan woman, exists today in the middle of the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, near the town of Nablus. Jesus and the woman are both Palestinians but from divergent traditions, mutually antagonistic. Such antagonisms provide the kindling that so often bursts into flame in the Middle East — right up to today.

This struggle was historic even in Jesus' day. Samaritans originated as northern Israelites who were *not* the ones deported by the Assyrian Empire in 722 BCE. These folks stayed behind and over time intermarried with Assyrian and later Babylonian invaders. When the exiled Israelites and Judeans were eventually allowed to return home, "they wanted nothing to do with the Samaritans" whom they deemed unclean ethnically and religiously. So "while there were many commonalities between the two, by the time of Jesus, the conflict was solidified by...two separate temples for the worship of Yahweh: the Jews rebuilt their temple in Jerusalem...but the Samaritans built their temple on Mount Gerizim."¹

That's a lot of broken history between Jesus and this woman. Along with purity laws and the massive power differential between genders in that society, these two should have no business interacting — as the disciples' astonishment shows us.

But Jesus, thank God, never gets trapped by social convention. Nor by prejudice. Nor by nationalism. Nor even by enmity. In this story we learn from Jesus how to treat an enemy. Not with violence and killing. Not with dehumanization and presumption of guilt. Not even with fear. Although warped interpretations of scripture get lots of attention, this biblical Jesus cannot be used to justify warfare. Jesus consistently lives what he preaches: love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.

So in this story, "Give me a drink?" is his word that cuts through centuries of mistrust and recrimination. Jesus shows his simple human need for water, the same reason the woman came to the well. That common ground sets a rich conversation unfolding.

Women's presence and voices are critical in the Gospel of John, and always showed positively. Jesus' mother Mary prompts his first miracle at the wedding at Cana. Faithful disciples Martha and Mary of Bethany share special closeness with Jesus. Martha confesses faith in the resurrection and witnesses a foretaste when Jesus raises her brother Lazarus. Mary their sister conveys gratitude and tenderness and a foreshadowing of grief by anointing Jesus' feet. Out of love and respect Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb, where witnessing him risen brings her unbelievable joy. Jesus commissions her as the first preacher of the good news of his resurrection.²

And there's this woman whom Jesus asks for water. She proves curious, fervent, perceptive, truthful. We are not told why she has had five husbands. There's no indication from the writer or

¹ Quotes (slightly edited) from Lewis, Karoline M. *Belonging*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2023. Kindle Edition, p. 22.

² Helpfully summarized in Kysar, Robert. *John: The Maverick Gospel, Third Edition*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007. pp. 179-180.

from Jesus that she's done anything sinful. It might all be symbolic (this is John's gospel, after all), the five husbands representing the people groups Samaritans intermarried with.³

On a human level, almost certainly she has been let down and has suffered much grief. Yet she remains a resilient spiritual seeker, open to Jesus' words of living water welling up into her heart and mind. "I know that Messiah is coming," she says. He replies: "I am...the one who is speaking to you." Jesus reveals his divine identity to her. And she believes him — maybe because he treats her, against all odds, with respect and love.

In this gospel we've just met Nicodemus who's a religious leader of Israel. He's curious about Jesus too, but he comes to converse by dark of night — symbolizing his dim confusion at what Jesus teaches him. He does not understand. Soon after, Jesus finds this Samaritan woman who talks with him at high noon, and *her* faith lights right up. So one scholar sums it up:

[Nicodemus] is part of the religious establishment, but cannot bring himself to believe in Jesus (at least publicly). The Samaritan woman, on the other hand, is cut off from the established religion, rejected and hated, but *she* comes to belief.⁴

By the end of the story she makes an excellent preacher and evangelist, calling her neighbors to encounter Jesus as well. One reason to enter relationship with strangers, with people across social divisions, with supposed enemies, with Samaritans or Muslims or agnostics, is that Jesus always calls us *together* into encountering God in spirit and truth. It's the good news he displays right here.

Every two years the Presbyterian Church holds its national General Assembly. Elders and pastors from every presbytery, along with denominational staff and mission partners, meet to discern theological and missional priorities for Christ's church. Four years ago that General Assembly set up a committee to draft a new confession, an affirmation of faith that would speak freshly from and to our current world. That faithful team of pastors, elders, and church members has created a confession that will be presented for consideration at this summer's GA. Their Proposed Confession can now be found online. I'll share two excerpts today.

No statement of faith is perfect by itself. But this one contains a lot of faithful truth-telling. As I read it this week I kept thinking about that historic enmity between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, and between so many other people groups. So first, here's some of the human truth the new confession admits:

We have honored and enthroned particular races, religions, and nations
as if they were God's favored ones, chosen for privilege,^[28]
while we have ignored, persecuted, and brutalized neighbors in need.^[29]
We have not loved our God, our neighbors, or ourselves.^[30]
These idolatrous systems are fueled by fear, and they produce fear.^[31]
They proclaim scarcity rather than God's abundant provision
obscuring the image of God in ourselves
and driving us away from one another....
We glorify conquest and war as offerings to false gods
rather than following the way of justice, mercy, and humility^[33]....
By distorting and weaponizing Scripture,
we have justified our idolatry and harmed those whom God loves.⁵

³ Gench, Francis Taylor. *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004. p. 114.

⁴ Kysar. p. 181.

⁵ "A Proposed New Confession for the PC(USA), February 20, 2026" <https://myga.pc-biz.org/search/3001517>

Like we practice every Sunday, truth-telling opens us to grace. And Jesus does not leave us stuck in the bad news, or bound by sin and death. Neither does this new confession. The following, I daresay, are words of living water, bubbling up through the community of Christ's people and bringing new life like the Samaritan woman joyfully received.

Friends, hear this new confession of good news:

Heeding the voice of the Spirit,^[55]

we remember who we are: God's beloved ones,

made in the image of

the only true, living God of abundant life,

Holy One and Holy Three.

Set free in Christ by the Spirit from the falsehood of sin and death,

we are the beggar whose pockets are full;

the rich man who gives away all he has;

the immigrant who has found her home;

the soldier who beats their sword into a plowshare.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, who is poured out on all peoples,^[56]

we live in community rather than competition;

we are freed to love fearlessly

those whom we call stranger, enemy:

for perfect love casts out fear.^[57]

Remembering and reclaiming what God has done for us in grace,

we knit our lives together as the church,

seeking to serve rather than to be served...⁶

In the name of God the Wellspring,
the Living Water,
and the Baptizing Spirit.

⁶ Ibid. In the original, the bracketed numbers note sources from scripture or other confessions.