

Sunday – March 27, 2011
Pastor - Bob Dixon
Sermon – **Waiting at the Well**

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Scripture: **John 4:5-42**

This morning we will hear a vibrant and powerful story from the scriptures. The story of the woman at the well, found in John 4 is a beautiful example of God's unending invitation for us to turn away from this worldly kingdom and to truly focus on God's Holy Kingdom. It tells the story of how Jesus meets and engages someone who would normally be marginalized in her society in the person of the Samaritan woman fetching water mid-day.

Let me begin by saying that for those who are worried about what time we will get out of here, let me first reduce your fears in saying that our scripture passage today is so rich and forthcoming in speaking to us about God's love and invitation that a month's worth of sermons on this very passage would not do it justice. As such I will focus on a very narrow portion of the scripture, the invitation, but none the less now wish to read it aloud to set the scene and provide some context.

I would ask you now to turn to the pages in your Bible if you would like to follow along in the word, or otherwise just relax and listen to this passage, which has become one of my favorites from the Gospels.

Lord May the Words of My Mouth and the Meditations of our Hearts be formed now by your Grace ...

John 4:5-42 (NRSV)

5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

9 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.)

10 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."

11 The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”

13 Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,

14 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.”

15 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.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” 17 The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’;

18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

23 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.

24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

25 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.” 26 Jesus said to her, “***I am he***, the one who is speaking to you.”

27 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?”

28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,

29 “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

30 They left the city and were on their way to him.

31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.”

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

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

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

35 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.

36 The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

37 For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’

38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”

40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

41 And many more believed because of his word.

42 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.”

Let me start by saying, when you go home today or this week, I want you to read this one over a couple of times. Although on first reading it seems like a simple narrative of Jesus merely encountering a woman, this passage is very deep and provides a rich glimpse into the nature of what it means to be a Christian, or as he says to worship in *spirit and truth*.

Let me start by saying that this encounter is rightfully surprising to all parties except Jesus. Many will recall the story of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10, who crossed the road to help a fallen stranger, when a priest stepped to the other side of the road and passed the victim by, but many do not realize that Jesus, a Jew, talking to a Samaritan at all was extremely shocking. You see there was a great deal of animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans that went all the way back to the days of the Old Testament and the exile of the Northern Kingdom of Israel as documented in 2 Kings around the mid 700-800s BC. Although the Samaritans and Jews shared common heritage in holding the five books of Moses as sacred scriptures, there is some belief that the hatred emerged when the exiles of the Northern Kingdom had returned and found the Samaritans had taken over the vacated lands and also began to worship local deities in addition to Yahweh. The two groups sought out justification in the scriptures for their own viewpoints on the right place to worship, that the Jews built their Temple in Jerusalem and the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, which are in the same region. Ever since then the Samaritans and Jews shared an intense mutual hatred, and the Samaritans became known for their

predatory attacks on Jewish pilgrims who regularly crossed their land enroute to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus was enroute from Galilee back to Jerusalem. He could have followed the normal route for pilgrims that side-stepped the Samaritan region, but instead he chose to break with the norm and tread right through this fearful territory in broad daylight. In his humanity, we are told that he needed a break and it was mid-day. We can not explain why the woman came at the hottest part of the day to draw the water. You see this in and of itself is unusual – she may have been some sort of outcast or being shunned from the community. According to the culture of the times it would have been unusual for a woman to have been alone because cultural norms of the time being such that a woman’s identity was tied to that of her husband or male protector such as her father and her identity with her clan or tribe. She would not have traveled outside the village without a group of others or her husband. We simply do not know why she wasn’t there with others engaging in this routine task. Perhaps it was because she had no protector. Perhaps it was because she was not a member of a clan or tribe or they had all been killed or departed. Perhaps it was because she had a little of what we call in the modern day – “baggage.” Verse 16 begins the discourse with Jesus where he already knows she is clearly not a woman of virtue. In her response she realizes she has somehow not hidden her “baggage” and begins to realize that the man she has encountered at the well possesses some capability to see beyond her outward state and examine her conscience and heart.

After the initial shock of having a Jewish man meeting her alone at the well, the Samaritan woman clearly senses something is amiss. You can feel the tension and fear. Jesus opens the conversation – “give me a drink”. Her response “How is it that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

Jesus knows she is afraid and has no idea of who she is meeting. In his reply, he begins to disclose his nature by saying “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’ you would have asked and he would have given you living water.”

The Samaritan woman sizes Jesus up – no bucket or water skin, no rope to reach the water level? What is this guy up to? Not understanding who this man Jesus is, she immediately focuses on the worldly purpose of the well and how we interact with it by needing something to reach the water and to pull it to us in the way of rope and bucket. But none the less she is curious about this claim of living water. Surely the water of Jacob’s well

provided life to generations in the region and nourishes all the living creatures, but how is it now become living. As an interesting side note the term “living water” in the scriptures is frequently associated with water that flows, water in motion --as in a stream, river or fountain. The water that would be pulled from a well would be considered still, or water at rest.

Jesus recognizes her focus in his reply and tells 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.” He tries again to help her understand who he is.

The Samaritan woman is now more curious, she wants this “living water” so that she doesn’t have to keep coming back to the well. To her it is a means to save time and lessen her daily burdens. Jesus now encourages her to go and get her husband. He already knows her story in the discourse about them. She starts to realize that this man knows more than he should merely from her appearance and starts to divine that he is in fact some sort of prophet or seer. She even tells Jesus that she recognizes he is a prophet, and begins to engage him in discussion of what she knows of being a Samaritan and worshipping on Mt. Gerazim and the tension with the Jews and the Temple in Jerusalem over the right place to worship. Jesus addresses this and gets right to the point, that it is immaterial where one worships, rather that God seeks those who worship in both the Spirit and truth. In other words what comes out of their lips, reflects what is in their hearts, and is lived out in the truth of their daily lives.

In verse 25 the Samaritan woman starts to get it. She says “I know that Messiah is coming – when he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Perhaps she is beginning to connect the dots. Jesus clears up the confusion and says “I am he, the one speaking to you.” The disciples return, and the woman in verse 28, following Jesus’ revelation of his true identity leaves her water jar and goes back to get the others.

Have you met Jesus yet at the well? Will you recognize him when you see him? Can you identify with the Samaritan woman?

Sooner or later in each of our lives we will have an experience of meeting Jesus at the well. For some this will occur here in a service of worship, moved by the words of a hymn, the testimony of a missionary, the prayers lifted up for healing or forgiveness. For some we will meet Jesus in the tragedy of a horrible illness, the unexpected loss of a loved one, in the constant struggle of a failed relationship, or the withholding of forgiveness. For some we will meet Jesus on some foreign shore in battle, on our first trip

abroad away from home, or on the lonely side of a highway in the dark fixing a flat tire. For some we will meet Jesus at the hour of our death, searching for relevancy of our human existence. No matter how, where or when I can without a doubt proclaim that sooner or later we all will have that “come to Jesus” experience.

Undoubtedly, upon meeting Jesus at the well many here have or will feel unworthy. Just like the Samaritan woman, we all have a little baggage we are trying to hide. Recognizing that baggage is a good thing because it makes us realize that we live in a state of sin and need to look for our redeemer seated at the well. We think that even if or when we saw Jesus or recognized him we would be so overcome by our own sense of sin that we would be incapable of the conversation.

Thankfully, the truth is he already knows. Try as you may you have nothing unknown to God or means to hide from his judgment . Jesus has told us he knows that we are broken and that God in fact sent him to die on the cross to redeem us of these sins. We are told by the scriptures to take these burdens and put them at the foot of the cross where they belong. God’s invitation to turn away from the world is unmerited, but at the same time is unceasing and inexhaustible as the ultimate sign of his love for us, God’s creation .

Lastly, Jesus tells us to take his living water and become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. We are told we must worship in both spirit and truth. That means taking in the Word of God, like a big glass of water -- reading the scriptures, hearing the message, sharing our thoughts and ideas of God’s revelation and internalizing it until it changes us from within.

As we experience that change we are told to take that spirit and make it evident in truth. That means taking the word and effecting change in the world around us. That means sharing the good news with the village about our experience at the well. That means taking what we hear and proclaim today in our worship and actually living it out in our lives as a testament to the transformation that the “living water” brings about. That means moving our focus beyond the worldly things that bring limited comfort and only quench our thirst for a time and seeking out that alone which provides unending satisfaction, the Living Water that is Christ Jesus.

Jesus is waiting for us at the well. Seek him out, know his voice and drink him all in. Amen.