

## Stories From the Well

*John 4: 3-42*

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 he, 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.

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."

There is a current song about the woman at the well story. The gist of song, is that the woman performing the song is in and out of relationships a lot, sitting with a broken heart, just like the woman at the well. And, of course, Jesus' acceptance of her is what she needs to begin to love herself so she stops being in relationships that hurt her. The song pulls on all the heart strings. And while growing to love ourselves like God loves us is a layer of the story, it doesn't quite reach the depths of the well. So how else are we to understand the well-known story about Jesus and the unnamed woman having a relational meeting at the well?

Start with background. Jesus, it says, *had to go through Samaria*. Technically, he could've gone around Samaria like any other good Jew would, but the Spirit blows where she blows so he *had to go*. In Samaria he finds himself near a historic landmark: Jacob's well. The well has significance; it has stories. Remember Abraham sends a servant off to find a spouse for his son, Isaac. The servant prays at a well for God to provide a spouse for Isaac. God answers: "Ask the first person you meet to give you a drink and if she does, it's a match." So simple back then, eh? So Rebeka shows up. Abraham's servant asks of her, "Can I have a drink." After she gives him a drink, he makes her a proposition, and she runs off to tell her family the good news. It's happily ever after from there. It's a well story. Then there's Jacob and Rachel. Same scenario—they meet at a well at midday and Jacob offers a drink. And in response to his proposal, Rachel runs home with good news saying, "I just met someone!" A well story. Then later Moses meets his spouse the same way—at a well! A well turns out to be quite the romantic meeting place—like match.com or meeting under the bleachers in my time! As we read the story, we have to understand the significance of the well. It has stories.

So then how are we to hear the interaction between Jesus and the woman from the woman's perspective? Maybe a bit playful? Maybe even a bit flirtatious? I mean, maybe it's heresy, but how fun is it to imagine the interaction! "Hey, get me a drink?" And she might be thinking [with an eyeroll] "I've heard that line before." But she is a survivor. She has spent her life navigating a system where men think they are ALL that! So she says, "Why are you talking to me? What are you doing? We both know this relationship isn't going anywhere. There are interracial laws which keep people like me and people like you from being together. Save your breath, amigo." "Well, if you knew the gift I was offering you and if you knew who is asking you for a drink, you'd be asking me for a drink, and that water would be life changing." And the woman thinks, *that's what they all say!* So she says, "Even if me being a Samaritan doesn't bother you, you don't have the right tools for this job! Where's your bucket! The well is deep, brother!" And we all know she probably isn't really talking about the well. "Where is this so-called 'living water'?" Jesus: "The water I give, no one is thirsty again."

The woman: "Well if that's true, then give me some so I don't have to frequent this place anymore!"

I mean, it might be heretical, but how fun is it to play with this interaction! We often read the story like it's a serious religious moment. But let's free ourselves to have some fun...the dialogue is playful, and witty, and real—at least from the woman's perspective!

But here's the thing: the well isn't the only part of the story with a history, is it? The woman has a story too. She has three strikes against her: Samaritan, woman, had several spouses. She hears the neighbor's gossip and whispers about her. She carries the injustices of the system in her

bones. She knows what it's like to think twice about where she can go, who she might run into, and what battles she will have to fight. So she shows up to the well when no one else is there. And Jesus names her thirst. Of course, it's vulnerable so she deflects by changing the subject. She claims herself as an outsider of God's promises. And Jesus goes with her—says it's about spirit and truth which makes up a true carrier of God's promise. The woman changes the subject again by bringing up the Messiah. Jesus goes along with her—and then something remarkable happens: he tells her who he is. It's the only time in John's gospel it happens. Jesus names who the woman is and then he names who he is. It's a genuine relational meeting. You see, in the presence of the Messiah we know who we really are—the good, the bad, the all of it. No need to hide some parts of our lives, because when we are in the presence of God's love, it is a shame-free zone.

Now, if we stop there, we miss the kicker: the woman goes back to tell others the good news. It's the blueprint of a well story. Except, she leaves the water jar behind. Why? Because she is not thirsty anymore. "If you knew the gift that was before you, you'd be asking me for a drink." It's the gift of deep love which returns us to ourselves and shows us that we are a gift to the world as well.

I recently reconnected with a friend after several years. She was a voice teacher at the music studio where I taught guitar lessons. Turns out, a few years back, she found herself in a toxic and abusive relationship. She called the police multiple times. Technicalities prevented him from not being removed from the home. Traditional avenues weren't working. When she called a hotline to report him, they called DCFS and threatened to take her children away. When they decided to leave anyways, the guy called the police on her and said she was abusing him and so they arrested her. Why do they always believe the guy's side of the story!? The system failed her. Her arrest was over the weekend, so she spent three nights in prison where she was cellmates with two other women. The women helped her devise a plan to get a protection order against the guy so he couldn't return. She didn't learn this from the system! Eventually, she got a protection order and through a series of what she calls, "God moments", she ended up opening a music studio where she could teach voice lessons helping others to find their voices after she said God helped her find hers again. And when I asked her if I could tell you her story she said, "Of course, I tell everyone I know!" Notice: no shame.

The gift Jesus offers us is to be set free to be an offering to the world and to empower others to see they are gifts as well. The woman at the well, leaves the well and becomes the community organizer for the living water she has been given. And she leaves her water jar behind. Why? Because she's not thirsty anymore.

In a moment we welcome new members. It's the first time in three years. Woohoo! They are a gift to us. As we listened to the stories about what drew them to our community, we hear that there is living water here, there is a Spirit and a truth and a freedom here. It is the gift Jesus offers to the woman and to all of us. To know the gift that we are so deeply, that we all free enough to leave our water jars behind.