

**John 4:5-42**

So [Jesus] 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

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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. 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."

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength & our redeemer (Psalm 19:14)

#### INTRO

Deep in the heart of the West Bank stands a stone church guarded by a thin, wizened, Orthodox Christian priest with a long white beard. He has been there for

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decades, despite living under the constant threat of death, escaping a death plot sixteen times. A crumbling chunk of the wall bears witness to the time someone threw a hand grenade at him. This priest, who spends his days writing icons, lived in the church for 14 years while surrounded by a hostile army, refusing to abandon the treasure he guards. He once refused a \$1 million grant from Yasser Arafat to continue construction of the church because he did not want any political strings attached to his mission to keep the church open to people of all walks of faith. This priest is the protector of a treasure of the three Abrahamic faiths, and he fights with his simple, quiet presence to keep the site open to Christians, Jews, and Muslims. He is the guardian of the treasure that sits deep at the very heart of the church.

As you enter the church, hundreds of lovely icons greet the eye, but one stands out from the others. It is simple and plain in comparison to the golden saints that gather everywhere the eye can see, but no less lovely for its simplicity.

This particular icon depicts a man and a woman in conversation, their gaze interlocked. She listens intently as he gestures confidently with assurance and authority. He points to the heavens with one hand, perhaps to her town with the other, as if to declare that there is an inherent tension between the two directions. Or perhaps he sends her—commissions her—to tell what he has shared in conversation. Either way, the tension is evident in her body turned toward him even as she appears to take a step away. She remains poised on the edge, almost as if she can barely believe what she has heard, yet yearning for it to be true.

This icon is key to the Christian tradition about the site, and perhaps is why the priest guards this treasure so intently. The priest is the guardian of Jacob's well, a holy site open to people of all nations and faiths. The priest is the guardian of a

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deep tradition of radical hospitality to the “other,” the hallmark of Jesus’s life and ministry. This is the site where Jesus overcame all social mores and boundaries to encounter a woman in a deep, life-changing moment.

#### TEXT

God’s intimacy with humans is a theme that leaps off every page of Scripture, if we only have eyes to see it. During the wilderness wanderings, the people quarreled with Moses. Their quarrel went well beyond asking for water in a thirsty place—they ended up asking: “*Is God with us or not?*” (Exodus 17:7). The question must have been heartbreaking for God to hear. Having taken note of the Israelites, God redeemed them from their enslavement with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. God had a daily presence with the Israelites—in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Yet, in the midst of their frustration because of their thirst, they questioned whether God was with them.

God’s response was to provide water, but also to double down on that visible presence among the Israelites. God told Moses to take some of the elders and go strike the rock, on which *they saw God standing in front of them* (Exodus 17:6). God would appear to the leaders of Israel (Exodus 24:9-10), and even to all the Israelites (24:17), repeatedly in order to confirm that God was with them. Years later, through the psalmist, God would remember the hurt and frustration God felt at Massah and Meribah by marveling that the Israelites put God to the test even though they had seen God’s work (Psalms 95:9).

- How could they question God’s presence among them while God was working?
- How can we do the same when God still works in this world?

Jesus’ conversation and interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well is a popular and well-known story. Yet, the enormity of Jesus’ presence among this

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despised people is frequently glossed over. The Samaritan woman understood how transgressive Jesus' intimacy was. She asked, *"How can you, a [male] Jew ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?"* (John 4:9). Lest we think it was just her who was surprised at Jesus' intimacy, when his disciples returned, they were shocked as well: *"Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a [Samaritan] woman ..."* (4:27). Yet, Jesus isn't content to undermine gender expectation.

The Samaritans who come to believe that Jesus is the messiah asked him to stay with them. In their Samaritan town. As a Jew. On his way up to Jerusalem (John 5:1). He agreed and stayed with them two nights, eating their Samaritan food, drinking water from their disputed well and sleeping in their Samaritan beds (John 4:40). Jesus' intimate presence among the Samaritans is meant to shock the readers of the gospel and confirm that God is present even among the most viscerally despised other. We skip over that radical goodness and relational presence to our detriment.

In Romans, Paul explains how drastic God's desire to live among us really is. God proves his love for us by sending Jesus to save us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). God saves us from wrath (the ancient texts don't say that this is *God's* wrath, by the way) when we need it most and are the least worthy. God desires reconciliation and will do anything to rescue us from our enslavement to sin and death. Paul says we can even boast in this reconciliation by a God who is crazy-in-love with us (5:11).

### **LIFE**

Our Gospel lesson is not just a tale about an individual. The story plays on a geopolitical front as well. Jesus approaches the nations, not just individuals. She represents an "outsider" nation.

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- Samaritans believe in one God, but that God's holy place is on Mount Gerizim not at the Temple in Jerusalem.
- Samaritans believe that they, and they alone, keep the "pure" faith, having preserved the bloodlines, traditions and old ways of worshipping for over 2,000 years.

When Jesus tells her *"Go, and come with your husband,"* we may assume that he speaks to her in the language of the time. In Hebrew, the term for husband used refers to master, husband, lord, or the particular god of a region. In Deuteronomy 22:22, an *ishah ba'al* is a married woman. The Hebrew word is also used in Jeremiah and Hosea to depict the relationship of husband and wife between God and Israel. Jesus tells her she has had five husbands, and the one that she is living with is not legitimate. He describes her personal story, but also her nation's story. The gods, traditions, and holy sites worshipped in the past are not legitimate. Legitimacy comes of worshipping the one God in spirit and truth, unconfined to particular spaces.

This is Good News, but also challenging news for the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus' time, just as it is for Jews, Christians, and Muslims today. It is challenging news because it reminds us that the people we think of as nobodies are somebodies in the eyes of God. This text, scholar Deborah Kapp says, *"reminds faithful readers that sometimes our attempt to draw the boundaries of the faith community are too narrow. We often prefer to leave out the nobodies, but Jesus does not do that. He welcomes outsiders, as well as insiders, into discipleship."*

### CONC

The example of the priest, that I began my message with, may provide us with the answer. Drinking deeply of the living water of God means having compassion for the other. In fact, as Jesus reminds us, it is at the heart of what it means to live out

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the Gospel. *“There is no greater love than this, that one lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).* If only we could open our hearts as Jesus does! Perhaps then the world would overflow with living water—embodying the true peace of God.

So, this weekend—especially as there is so much still coming out about the COVID 19 pandemic—as you hear the words of God proclaimed, let the texts speak to you of God’s powerful and intimate presence with you. Even at our worst, lowest, most embarrassing and shameful moments, God is present, God loves us, and God is willing to sacrifice to save us and reconcile us to Godself. That is **very** good news!