

Lessons from the Woman at the Well

John 4:5-26

Lent 3

March 15, 2020

The Word of the Lord from John 4: "I who speak to you am He." This is the Word of the Lord.

I. The Man at the Well

What does He want? There's a stranger sitting by the well, and it's about as welcome a sight as a man leaning against your car in a deserted parking lot. The woman has come to draw water at an odd time of the day, when nobody else is around. For the women of the town who come to the well, there's strength in numbers, but this woman is all alone. And now there's a stranger sitting by the well. What does He want?

He looks tired. Is He just a weary traveler passing through? Does He lie in wait, intending to do her harm? She can tell early on that He's a Jew, not a Samaritan, so it's likely they'll be enemies from the very start: they both have the same ancestor in Jacob, but Jews and Samaritans have never gotten along. Maybe, just maybe, He'll just leave her alone.

But when she draws near, He asks her for water. No threat here. He's a man weak from thirst, sitting by a well with no means of drawing the water. And although it's customary for Jews to avoid speaking to Samaritans, and doubly frowned-upon for Jewish men to speak to Samaritan women, He asks her for water. So the woman retorts, perhaps to needle Him a bit, "How is it that You, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?"

His response isn't what she expects, for He takes the conversation in a different direction. He answers, "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." So which is it—is He a weakened man in need, or is He a man with a special gift to give?

"Living water"? "Living water" can also mean "running water," the kind that's in the underground stream at the bottom of the well—the water that the Man needs help to get. If He can't get it without her help in the first place, how can He give it to her? That's why she asks, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do You get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." And if the great Jacob had to dig a well to get down to that water, how exactly are You going to get water to give to me? Are you greater than Jacob?

The Man turns the conversation again: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

That has the woman intrigued: “never be thirsty again”? Never have to haul the buckets or skins out to the well and fill them again? It sounds too good to be true, but she believes the Words—she wants the gift. She says, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.”

Then the stranger drops the bomb: “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The words hit hard, a solid body blow: she’s got to be careful, or else this Man isn’t going to help her. After all, what sort of man would have living water and eternal life to give? Only some sort of holy man could come with gifts like that. And who would He give them to? It only makes sense that a holy man would give such gifts as rewards to those who are leading holy, upright, moral lives. If He finds out what sort of life she’s led and what sort of a woman she is, there’s no way that He’s going to give her any sort of reward.

She’s got to play this one carefully. She doesn’t want to lie, exactly; but there’s no way that she can tell Him the truth. So she says, “I have no husband.” Which isn’t a lie, exactly. It just doesn’t tell the whole truth. It makes her sound like a widow, like a woman fending for herself in a dangerous world. And why wouldn’t a holy man help out a poor woman who has no husband?

The Man’s response is devastating: “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” He knows. He knows all about her life, her mistakes, her failures, her sins. And if holy gifts are for holy people, He’s not going to be giving her living water or eternal life.

But...if He’s known all along, why did He start this conversation in the first place...? What does this strange, thirsty man by the well want? She keeps the conversation going: “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but You say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” How does this holy Man fit in with their religion? Samaritans worship at a nearby Mt. Gerizim, but their worship has added other gods and other teachings. Jews, of course, worship at the temple in Jerusalem, where the sacrifices are made and God is present in the Holy of Holies. So what’s this man doing here? Shouldn’t He be at the temple in Jerusalem, near the presence of God?

The Man responds, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 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 true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” This stranger is full of surprises: the time has come when people will not worship at one specific location, but all over the world. How can this be? Because God will be present all over the world for what happens in worship. They will worship in spirit and truth: and spiritual worship is faith trusting in the truth, in the promises of God.

That's a radical change in worship, and there's only one who could declare it to be so. The woman ventures, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ). When He comes, He will tell us all things." Could it be? Could it possibly be that this weakened, thirsty Man by the well is, in fact, the Messiah?

Jesus answers: "I who speak to you am He." The English lets us down here: Jesus actually says, "I AM, the One who is speaking to you." Jesus says "I AM" to declare He is Yahweh, the great I AM, the Lord of heaven and earth now in human flesh.

Behold and wonder: this woman, this Samaritan woman with her terrible past, is standing before the Lord of heaven and earth at a well outside of town. Though He knows her past, He's offered her living water—He's offered her salvation that will continually well up within her and give her eternal life. This holy gift is solely by His grace, not because she's earned it. In other words, He hasn't come to give His holy gifts as rewards to holy people: He has come to give His gifts to make sinful people holy. He's come to the well for this woman, and she departs the well that day as His beloved, forgiven, very-much- alive and loved child.

II. Three Lessons

What a great text for the season of Lent as we draw nearer to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. And what a great text anytime to teach us of our Savior's mercy. Here are three important lessons.

The first is this: it's when Jesus looks least like the Savior that He is most your Savior. On Good Friday, Jesus is on the cross for you as much as He was at that well for that woman. At the well, He was tired, weak and thirsty: the woman couldn't tell He was the Christ by looking at Him, for He looked like a man in need of help, not a man with help to give—much less eternal life to give! On the cross, He's also tired, weak, thirsty, and worse: He's beaten. He's scorned. He's stripped and shamed. He's mocked as a criminal. He's bleeding out. He's dying. No one will ever look more helpless than a man nailed immovably to a cross, unable to do anything but struggle for every last breath. The sight, or just the idea, of Christ and Him crucified is enough to drive a lot of people away: perhaps because the idea of sacrifice strikes them as just too primitive, or because they want a God who's always saving by doing mighty acts of power. Whatever the reason people come up with, the real reason is that they want God to act their way, not His—and because they have no faith, they will not submit to God acting according to His own holy will. On the other hand, you—by faith—look at the cross with gratitude and praise, for you know that Christ has chosen to save you by His mercy and grace: mercy and grace so great that He would take your place and die for your sins on that cross.

You'll always be tempted to glory instead, though. You'll always be tempted to want Jesus to work in your life through mighty acts of power and deliverance from this trouble or that affliction, and such miracles will seem far greater acts of God than forgiveness. Likewise, when you suffer pain, distress, weakness, setback or grief, you'll always be tempted to believe that Jesus isn't much of a Savior or that He must be far, far away. That's the devil's whisper that God

should be acting toward you with power rather than mercy, as well as his lie that your salvation consists of a carefree life in a care-filled world. But by faith, you know better. You repent when you find yourself thinking along these lines, and you say, "I know from God's Word that He is most my Savior when He looks least like my Savior." It was true for the woman at the well. It is certainly true for you at the cross. The eyes see nothing spectacular at the font or the altar, either. It is true in affliction: no suffering is pleasant at the time, but you will look back to find that the Lord used such times of weakness and failure to prune away idols, to refine your faith, and to strengthen you as His beloved child. Sufferings do not mean that the Lord is weak or far away. He remains your Savior, with living water to give you eternal life.

The second lesson is this, and it goes right to the Gospel: your Lord Jesus Christ does not give you gifts to reward you for your holiness, but He gives you His gifts to make and keep you holy. You know this intellectually, anyway: if you were already holy without Him, you wouldn't need Jesus to be giving you forgiveness. He didn't die on the cross to give you bonus points for your own righteousness, but because you didn't have any righteousness of your own. Christ died to save sinners.

But here's the thing: you're used to hiding your sins and weaknesses. You hide them from other people all the time; and, like the woman at the well, you get the idea that you should hide them from the Lord, too. So you think of sins you've done or sins you're doing right now, things that you certainly wouldn't want friends or family or a pastor to know about; and you wall those sins up in a sealed room and pretend they don't exist. You even act before God as if they never happened, because you're tempted to believe that God would never have any love for someone who'd done something like that. Like the woman at the well, you think that God will only help you if you hide the truth about how terribly sinful you are.

This is a hopeless strategy—it's a temptation of the devil designed to rob you of grace. God is all-knowing, after all: He already knows how terribly sinful you are, even more than you do. Hiding sin from Him is impossible, and doing so only demonstrates that you're willing to lie to God and pretend to be someone you're not. But worse than lying to God, that lie also declares that you don't think Jesus' death was enough to atone for sinners like you—and so you accuse Jesus of being a failed Savior as you pretend to be better than you are. But Jesus didn't die on the cross for pretend sinners: He died on the cross for real sinners. So when you're tempted to think you can hide your sins from God, by faith you say, "But what of the woman at the well? As long as she hid her past from Jesus, she couldn't be forgiven for it; but when it came to light and she acknowledged her sin, it was then that she finally knew that Christ accepted her, that He truly forgave all of her sins."

So it is with you: as long as you're trying to hide your sins from God, you're holding onto them to keep them hidden. As long as you're holding onto them, you're not forgiven for them. So you confess your sins—even the ones that make you feel most ashamed, and you know that Christ's grace is sufficient to save you from these, too. He does not give grace and life and

salvation as rewards to you because you've made yourself holy, for you cannot: He gives His grace and life and salvation to you to make you holy.

The third lesson is this: the hour has come, and the hour is here, to worship the Father in spirit and truth. There is no temple in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim for you to go to, nor do you have to. Remember, spiritual worship is faith trusting in the truth, trusting in the promises of God; and among those promises are Christ's promises that He is with you always, even to the end of the age. Worship is not you demonstrating your love for God by your sacrifices of work or fervor; worship is the coming of Christ to you, to give you forgiveness, life and salvation. So by faith, you rejoice: because just as Jesus detoured through Samaria for that woman at the well, so He comes here today for you.

She could look at the Man at the well and say, "There is the Christ, and He has come here to forgive my sins and save even me." You look at your baptism, you look at the Word preached Sunday after Sunday, you look at the holy Supper and say, "There is the Christ, and He has come to forgive my sins and save even me." The worship of God in spirit and truth is to say, "I know that I am a sinner, and I trust the true promise that Christ has come here to forgive me."

Christ is here, present in His means of grace, just as He has promised. When you hear His Word—proclaimed or joined to water or bread and wine, you know that it is Christ saying, "I who speak to you am He." Better, you know that Jesus is saying, "I am the great I AM, and I am here speaking to you." No less than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is here to speak His saving Word to you; and because it is He, there is no one greater who can overrule Him. He speaks His Gospel which is sure and saving for you, for He declares to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen