

A Living Encounter at a Well  
 John 4:5-26  
 March 12, 2023

"Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour."

### I. At the Well

Men. They're all the same. That's what life has taught the Samaritan woman who makes her way to the well. She's been married five times, and there's no hint that she's been widowed even once: that's a tough run even by 21st-century Canadian standards, and it must be nearly the record for the ancient Middle East. Now, she's with a sixth, though they haven't gotten married. Why bother? We don't know if she's been picked up by a string of losers who've treated her badly, or if she's proven so intolerable that she's earned the boot for her own failings; almost certainly, the truth is in between and the blame rests on both sides. In any event, marriage has not proven to be the way it's supposed to be, where husband and wife are working hard and serving one another. "How it's supposed to be" is probably a worth only a bitter laugh by now, because "how it really is" has doubtlessly done great damage to this woman. Men. They're all the same. They use and they throw away. You can't live with them, and you can't shoot them.

The woman goes to the well at the sixth hour – in the heat of the day -- a good time to go, I'm told, if you don't want to meet anybody else. But as she draws near the well, there's a tired man sitting there - just who she doesn't want to meet. What does this one want from her? Perhaps He's another predatory alpha male, looking to use her like so many others. Or maybe He's a moralist, who's going to tell her how terrible she is. Of course, there's a good chance that He's going to ignore her: He's clearly a Jew while she's a Samaritan, and the two peoples don't exactly get along. But there He is; and as she comes close, He opens His mouth to speak. What does He want?

A drink of water. He wants a drink of water. He's sitting next to the well, but He doesn't have a way to reach deep down and get any water. Some man this is - weak, dehydrated and unprepared. At this rate, He could die of thirst while He sits by the well, so close to water and unable to reach it. She retorts, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" He must be pretty thirsty to be engaging her in conversation - if He's like those Pharisees, it's a blow to His pride and a violation of their code of conduct.

His response is a puzzler, though: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." "If only you knew who I am." Uh-huh. Now, what kind of a con is this guy running? He's thirsty and unable to get a drink for Himself, but He's still got water to give away? Living water? What does this mean? She challenges, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?" Put up or shut up, Mr. Whoever-you-are. His response sounds even stranger than the previous: "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." Now it's not just living water, but living water that

quenches and enlivens forever. This sounds worse than the usual snake-oil scam...except that she's sort of beginning to believe it: "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

But it's then that He drops the bomb: "Go, call your husband, and come here." She chooses her words carefully, shielding herself as she can. "I have no husband." But he knows. The Man says, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly." He's caught her, exposed her greatest shame. In fact, He's known all along - and He's still offering her this living water. What does He want?

Here's what He doesn't want: He doesn't want to take from her or take advantage of her. He doesn't want to force her into a corner to make her do His bidding. He doesn't want to beat her down some more. He wants to give. He wants to give her living water. He wants to give her eternal life.

So let's back up for a second. Why is Jesus sitting at the well, exhausted and thirsty? He's sitting, exhausted and thirsty, because He's become flesh. He needs a drink of water because He's become fully human with all of those biological frailties and weaknesses. It didn't have to be this way: He could have stayed in heaven, where He would never tire or thirst. But He hasn't. He's become flesh and been born of Mary. That's why He's tired and thirsty.

He's going to be more exhausted and thirstier soon. He's going to be stripped, scourged and nailed up on a cross. There, as one of His last seven words, He will say, "I thirst." He's going to suffer for this woman's six counts of failed relationships along with the rest of her sins and the sins of the rest of the world. That's why He's become flesh - to go to that cross and to die that death.

On the way to Calvary, He's gotten thirsty and stopped by the well. He needs, and asks for, a drink of water because He's taken on vulnerable flesh and blood in order to redeem this woman. But while His body requires hydration, He's there to give her the greater gift. He engages her in conversation, speaking His life-giving Word in order to give her faith and forgiveness. By the end of the conversation, He's revealed to her that He is the Messiah, the long-awaited Savior. He's come to give her living water - forgiveness of sins and eternal life. He gently warns her of her sins of immorality, because those sins so lacking in righteousness will rob her of the forgiveness He gives. Rather than leave her in sin and death, He's come to give: He's come to give her and all who gather forgiveness, life and salvation.

This Man is unlike any other. He's the Son of God in human flesh, come to save this woman, come to redeem the world.

## 2. A Singular Savior

Saviors. They're all the same. At least, that's how society looks at it. Each church has their particular song and dance - each one has its schtick and list of things that true disciples do. Each one presents a list of requirements for the "real" people of God. Truly, the popular view of religion is that all roads lead to God, so just pick the one with the best ride and prettiest view along the way. Even within the Church, many Christians see all denominations as equally true, despite different doctrines, as if God runs a theological ice cream parlor where all the flavors are good; and it's a sad fact that congregations often grow not by adding unbelievers, but by adding sheep from other Christian congregations looking for a change. It's okay they think, saviors are all the same.

This view is almost correct - almost, but not quite and therefore tragically wrong. Every savior in every religion - except one - comes to take something from you. Every savior of every religion, except one, demands that you give; and if you give enough, then you can be saved. Do good. Be sincere. Don't violate the moral code. Tolerate. Don't tolerate. Have lots of kids. Prevent overpopulation by not having kids. Serve a lot at church. Demonstrate in your community. Support holy war. Make sacrifices. Pray five times a day. Meditate until you achieve perfect nothingness. Put your knees on the prayer rug and then mail it back. Whatever.

That's what saviors do: they show you what you need to do in order to please God. No wonder religions get lumped together these days, because they're all religions of Law: do this, do that, and God will love you.

Except one. Where all other religions are really the same at heart, Christianity is different. Yours is not a Savior who gathers you at this well in order to tell you what to do. He's the Savior who has become flesh to live for you, die for you, rise for you. He's the Savior who gathers you here, in this place, to give you living water - to give you forgiveness and life and salvation. As He did for the Samaritan woman, He offers you the living water of His grace, requiring nothing from you.

Many are misled because they don't see Jesus as a "decent" Savior: they see Him nailed on a cross, wounded and dying, and want a more powerful Messiah than that. But that crucifixion is your salvation: it is the greatest testimony of God's love for you that His Son would take on such fragile flesh and blood for the very purpose of sacrificing Himself in your place.

There are those who will object to the notion that Jesus requires nothing. "After all, He makes me give up sin!" some will say, but this is simply a misunderstanding. When a doctor saves a patient, we sometimes say that he's given that patient life. No one would say that the patient has had to give up death in order to have life. The doctor will tell the patient things to avoid which will lead to death again; but he's not requiring something from him. At that point, though, life has already been given to the patient, and the doctor simply wants to see it not thrown away. Likewise, when the Lord gives us forgiveness and eternal life, it is not that He has made us give up death - He has removed that curse from us. Does He bid us to go and sin no more? Of course, because He wants us to remain alive; but He has already given us, and still gives, forgiveness and life as a free gift.

Sin seeks to throw that gift away, and so the Lord warns against it. The living water remains a free gift of God.

And, of course, some will object because the teaching of Jesus as the only Savior is so narrow-minded. Why is Jesus so exclusive? Because He is the only Savior who gives instead of taking. He's the only one who has given His life, shed His blood, died and risen for you. No other savior has done all the work, so they require you to do it. For one thing, it's a bad sign when a god needs you to do the work. And if it's up to you to earn salvation, what do you need a god for, anyway? Besides, don't forget: you can never do enough to raise yourself from the dead.

Jesus Christ can raise you from the dead, for He Himself has risen from the dead. Furthermore, He gives this life to you freely, no matter who you are.

What comfort this is, because no one gathers here unscarred, unscathed. There will be those who have been used or terribly manipulated by others. There will be those who sacrificed virginity for "true love," only to find that it's all over the next day. There will be those who tried to do everything to save a relationship, only to see another selfishly destroy their efforts. There will be those who suffered for the right thing, or those who suffer regret for the wrong thing. There will be those who have been rejected, rightly or wrongly; and those who are haunted by past mistakes, weaknesses and failings - not to mention ongoing mistakes, weaknesses and failings. The devil, the world and your own sinful flesh have a way of beating you down until you've got nothing left to give. In reality, that is all of us; those who have undergone such trouble, however, recognize it much more clearly than the rest.

We all have nothing left to give.

So rejoice! That's precisely who Jesus came to save-those who have nothing to give, nothing to offer. As He required nothing from the Samaritan woman at the well, He requires nothing from you to be His child. He knows the temptations that you have undergone, for He Himself was tempted - yet He remained without sin to be your Savior. He understands the frailty of your mind and body, because He was subjected to the cruelest of tortures. He has not become flesh to turn you away, but to live for you, die for you, rise for you.

And now, in His means of grace, He visits you, present with you in Word and Sacrament as fully as He was present with that woman. He doesn't come with demands, but with gifts. He declares, "I have living water for you, because I thirsted in your place on the cross. I have life for you because I have died your death. I have innocence restored for you, because I have suffered your guilt. I do not demand that you give before I bless you with these things. The price is paid, and the sacrifice is over, and I come only to give this precious gift: you are forgiven for all of your sins." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.