

Water from the Well That Is Christ
John 4:1-30, 39-42

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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.” (Jn. 4:15)

We do not have to go to a village well, as many do, to have water enough for our coffee, our cooking, our bathing, our laundering, or our gardening. Thanks be to God, we live where water in good and fresh supply is available at our fingertips at the touch of a faucet.

But we do go in search of something to refresh and replenish our souls. We crave resources sufficient to satisfy and sustain our spirits, especially when hope seems dry as dust and faith itself is weary.

With that shared need in the forefront of our minds, I ask you to turn with me to John 4 and study the woman at the well, the man whom she meets at the well, and the conversation the two of them share at the well.

The woman at the well

The woman at the well has a bit of religion in her. It is part of her background, at least, and may have been part of her upbringing. She has a good grasp of it. She is able to talk about it with some clarity and she recognizes it as something that officially carries hope with it. “I know the Messiah is coming,” she says; and “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us” (Jn. 4:25). While that bit of faith is part of her, it seems, for the most part, to be something truer of her ancestors than of her. When she speaks of worship she links it to something her elders did and not to something she does (Jn. 4:20). I have the sense that religion to her is more something she is ready to debate than to live by (Jn. 4:20). Whatever her religion means to her, it has yet to settle something in her life, for she seems to be dissatisfied and what she says of religion suggests it has done nothing to help.

The woman at the well has plenty of troubles to sort through. Life has not turned out for her the way she had planned. She has had five husbands. I highly doubt she went into her first marriage thinking her groom was going to be the first of a quintet. I highly doubt she began any of her five marriages believing it to be temporary. There is pain in her past; it is all written upon her heart; we do not get to see it spelled out, but we can imagine it full well. How many of those five times was she made a widow and thrust into the pain of grief and loss and loneliness? Or how many of those five times was she the victim of abuse and made to suffer the injustice of beatings and beratings? There were five marriages alright, but I imagine the five add up to more pain than they do to marital bliss. And my hunch is that this pain is what the religion in her background was not answering to her satisfaction.

So the woman at the well is parched inside. She has a thirst. It is the kind of thirst we have already identified. She wants the kind of water – spiritual water – that can refresh a faith that has been made weary by life and revitalize an arid hope that no longer flowers. She wants something to help see her through, something to help her to cope with her life's fatigues and sorrows and stresses and strains. "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty." (Jn. 4:15)

The man whom she meets at the well

The man this woman meets at the well is a stranger to her. It is not simply that she does not know him. He is different from her and there is a distance between the two. She is a Samaritan and he is a Jew. The distance is regional and racial and historical. To imagine what it was like we can translate it into any one of the deep divides that persist today between people. And we can also translate it into the distance that may still seem to persist between Jesus and us: he is of the first century, we are of the twenty-first; we look to be separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years and thousands of assumptions. She asked, "How is it that you, a Jew, as a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jn. 4:9) We might ask, "How can a man of then be of help to us now?" There was a difference between this man and that woman.

The man at the well tells her he has something to offer. He calls it living water (Jn. 4:10). He speaks of it in a lively way and tells of its dynamic properties. The way he describes it, it is nothing flat or stale or stagnant in any way. It springs up. It gushes forth. It supplies in such a way that it not only quenches thirst it waters and refreshes and revitalizes right up to eternity (Jn. 4:14).

The man who says he has something to offer does not appear to have anything to offer. The story opens with him sitting down on a bench. He is weary. He is hot. He is thirsty. He is spent. He talks of being able to dispense living water but he doesn't have so much as a bucket to carry any water (Jn. 4:11). A few chapters earlier in the Gospel According to John Nathanael, when he was told of Jesus of Nazareth, just gave that a snort: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (Jn. 1:46) Well might this woman be wondering, "Can anything good come from this Jew who talks of an elixir when he hasn't even so much as a glass?"

But now the woman discovers that this man at the well has at least one thing to offer. What he has is insight. And his insight is full of understanding. Somehow he is able to see into her soul. He is able to read all the pain that is written upon her heart. And this is what catches her off guard. It piques her interest and commands her attention. This man understands her and can explain her life. I think it can be said that in this she begins to taste the first sips a living water.

The man at the well leads this woman to a thrilling possibility. She does not yet have what Peter is going to profess in a couple of more chapters of John. There, late in chapter 6, Jesus gives the disciples the chance to turn back from following him. Peter, speaking for them all, blurts out, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68). This woman doesn't quite have that yet, but she has caught sight of a thrilling possibility. She is captivated by a *maybe*. "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (Jn. 4:29)

The late poet Mary Oliver was captivated by a *maybe*. Here are some of her lines:

I have refused to live
locked in the orderly house of
reasons and proofs.
The world I live in and believe in
is wider than that. And anyway,
what's wrong with *Maybe*?

You wouldn't believe what once or
twice I have seen. I'll just
tell you this:
only if there are angels in your head will you
ever, possibly, see one.¹

Just that way, it seems, the woman at the well tasted sweet possibility in *maybe*. She did not know everything or even much of anything. But she was ready to suppose, and that was enough to be living water. "He can't be the Messiah, can he?"

The conversation the two have at the well.

We have already covered the conversation, but I just want to line it out for you once more without lingering over it, just as a way of showing it to be a model of the kind of conversation you can have with Jesus beside your well.

I want to line it out because I fear one of the great difficulties people have in trying to have a meaningful conversation about their lives with Jesus is the fact that they suppose the conversation has to be altogether religious. They suppose it has to be holy, something straight from the hymnbook or out of the prayerbook, something that exudes a faith they are not sure they actually possess. The conversation between the woman at the well and Jesus is enough to prove that your conversation with him does not need to meet your expectations of being religious enough to be appropriate.

Jesus asked something of this woman. She refused to give it. Jesus asked her to get him a drink and I don't read that she gave him one. Instead she challenged his right to ask anything of her. "Who do you think you are that you can ask anything of me?"

She was honest about her life. He appreciated that she spoke the truth, and he accepted her just as she was.

She remembers the little religion she has, and he builds upon it.

The conversation eventually involves others and the woman openly shares her faith explorations.

That is the conversation. None of it sounds like it comes from the Book of Psalms. None of it smacks of the sanctuary. There is not a *thee* or a *thou* or any kind of sacred formula to be

¹ Mary Oliver, "The World I Live In," *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York: Penguin, 2017), p. 5.

found. There is just blunt honesty. And that is what leads to the *maybe* that brings this woman to think she has found water at the well that is Christ.

The Gospel According to John reports that this episode we have been studying took place in a town called Sychar. Interestingly, when I turned to my books to gather some background on Sychar, I discovered that the biblical archeologists aren't exactly sure where Sychar was actually located.²

Well I know where Sychar is. It is your back porch where you sit and ponder the conditions of your life. It is your garden where you take frustrations out on weeds and let your mind search for the green shoots of answers to all that perplexes you. It is along the familiar route you run, lost in thought as you try to breathe in new answers. Sychar is wherever you examine life in hope of finding insight; it wherever you tussle with faith and faith's place in your life. It is wherever you open yourself to think about your own soul and consider the possibility of your life with God. You won't find every answer there, but you can find all the strength you need, and it shall be as water from the well that is Christ.

² D. C. Pellett, "Sychar," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, ed by George Arthur Buttrick, *et. al.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 471.