

## **“The Samaritan Woman”**

**Text: John 4:1-15**

Prayer: O God, quench our thirsts with your gift of living water and make us living water for others. Amen.

Our Gospel story in John is what I call a “water-talk”. And it is a dialogue between two characters, two strangers at odds with each other – a Jew and a Samaritan; a man and a woman; a teacher and an outcast; Jesus and the Samaritan Woman. We find both of them not only crossing the boundaries of their cultures and religious identities, but leaping over those boundaries. In the heat of noonday, she went to the well when no one else was there. Her timing was intentional, because at other times, she was embarrassed by the looks she got from others when she drew water. There have been moments when she has wished that she was invisible and imagined at times that she thought she was. This unnamed woman walks slowly with a bucket that hangs from each end of the yoke she carries on her shoulders. She takes the pain for granted, but from time to time she stops to shift the weight from one bruise to another.

As she straightens up, she sees Jesus sitting beside the well. Imagine the fear that crept into her spine. Why is this man here in the middle of the day? He appears to be thirsty and yet he does not have anything to help him draw water. She thinks of turning and running for the village. She hopes that he will do no harm to her. Maybe he will just insult her and walk away. But this man is far from insulting her – in fact, he engages her in a conversation! Jesus talks to the Samaritan Woman longer than he talks to anyone else in the Gospels—longer than he talks to any of the disciples, any of his accusers, or anyone in his family. She is a surprising choice for a long conversation. In those days, women were only allowed to talk to their spouses. They are not even allowed to worship with men, whose morning devotions include the prayer, "Thank you, God, that I am not a woman."

When Jesus lifts his head and asks for a drink, she sees he is a Jew. What in the world is he doing here? Has he lost his mind? Has he lost his faith, to be talking to her like this? The Jews have rules about what they can eat and drink. If he drinks water from a Samaritan bucket, he'll be breaking the purity law. But he talks to her as though she matters, and as if her being there in the hottest part of the day is not out of the ordinary.

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?” How is it that you, one of those people who considers me unclean, now suddenly ask something of me - a Samaritan? We know they are not exactly on the same wavelength. Jesus told her a riddle: “Everyone who drinks of this water from the well will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the living water that I will give them will never be thirsty.” The woman was awestruck and wanted whatever Jesus offered. "Give me this water" so that I will never have to face the other women at this well. "Give me this water" so that I can stay at home and pretend everything is fine. Give me this water so I'll not be burdened for the rest of my life.

That’s when Jesus changed the subject to something more personal. He asked about her husband. She could have objected. She could have lied. Instead, she looks him in the eye and says: "I have no husband," and with that shred of truth, Jesus tells her the rest of the truth about herself. That she has had five husbands! Jesus here is not chastising or condemning her or calling her to account; rather, he sees her, compassionately naming and understanding her circumstances. Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz Weber points out, that there are a number of reasons why the Samaritan woman might have the past she has. Perhaps she was married off as a teen bride, then widowed and passed along among her dead husband’s brothers, as per the “Levirate marriage” practice of the day. Maybe her various husbands abandoned her because she was infertile. Maybe she was a victim of abuse. Maybe she has a disability. Whatever the case, we know for sure that in the first century, women didn’t have the legal power to end their own marriages. And without male support, she would not survive. It is almost too much. If he knows about all her husbands, there is no telling what else he knows, and she would rather not find out. It is like discovering that the person you are talking to has X-ray vision. It is time to step back and cover up again. She tries to shift the subject to religion, to draw him into an old argument.

"Where should we worship God? At the Samaritans’ mountain or the Jewish temple?" If Jesus was a condescending, proud egocentric person, he could have put her down. But instead, Jesus talks to her. Jesus emphasizes that it is not the place of worship that matters but how we worship God. “God is Spirit – and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth!” It doesn’t matter whether it is on a mountaintop or in a temple. Worship is about being one with

the holy and being truthful to each other. Finally, not knowing what else to say, she remarks: "Won't it be great when the Messiah comes? I know that someday good will overcome evil and hope will win out over despair." John declares Jesus as the Messiah: "I am the One whom you call the Messiah. That moment of revelation had come." Huh? This information is too much to handle. Their conversation is disrupted by the untimely presence of his astonished disciples whose disapproving looks pierced like a killing arrow.

What is this living water that Jesus offers the Samaritan Woman? Jesus went to the well for a drink to quench his physical thirst. The woman also needs a drink: she needs the living water of welcome and inclusion, the living water of healing and wholeness and a new life. This living water that Jesus offers is a connection, a relationship, a sense of embracing and welcoming the other – a barrier-breaking water. Jesus offers living water to the Samaritan Woman, symbolic of a desire to be present to the aches of her life riddled with difficult challenges. Jesus offers the possibilities of a different kind of hope; to empower her to embrace her faith and send her along the way to tell a story others have not heard. Jesus trusts her with living water in response to her thirst. Jesus reveals the life force of water that is found in God's grace. And in their various needs, Jesus and the Samaritan Woman affirm their mutual humanity. Patricia Farris declares: "They share in the holy Source of Life that transcends all boundaries, custom, hatred, fear and scarcity. In the desert at noon, with all distraction stripped away, all shadows erased, the light shines bright enough for these two strangers to discover that they need each other. As they are transfigured in the light of the noonday sun, each enemy sees the face of a friend. Distance dissolves into a relationship. Enmity melts into mutuality. They glimpse a spiritual wholeness, a new healing reality."

The Samaritan Woman leaves her jar behind – the token of her present difficult and dependent life – to go tell others. She has, indeed, encountered living water, has been liberated from the chains of invisibility and marginalization and wants to share this living water with others. The Samaritan woman runs home to her neighbours and invites them to come and see this fountain of water springing up inside her. Like the Samaritan Woman, we, too, have heavy jars that we lug, day after day, under the hot, scorching sun, hoping to find that living water to make us whole again. Our jars are the "should haves," "ought tos," and the "if onlys" of our

lives. They are the times we let the people we love down, the times we let ourselves down, and the times we let God down. They are the parts we keep hidden—our insecurities, our apathy, and our fears.

I came across an interesting story of a Christian revival. At the completion of a regularly scheduled chapel service on February 8, 2023, at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky, students lingered to pray, worship, and sing praise songs. The worship leader has a one-line prayer that changed those who attended the service: “Revive us God, by your love!” The students have not stopped and, moreover, have been joined, far and wide, by people across the world who desire to seek healing and purpose in this university space. These students and people from all walks of life are hungering and thirsting for something more than the world can offer. I’m not really a big fan of revivals but the testimonies I heard so far were so authentic and organic that I knew this was not an orchestrated form of evangelism. A filmmaker who attended the revival said that there is unity, sincerity of worship and no show. It was just a sweet movement of God’s spirit – the Living Water.

In a thirsty and hungry world where people are lonely and suffering, how can we be Living Water? I think Jesus is calling us for revival- to pay attention to the parched places where the waters of love and care are needed—it may be here in Bells Corners and the communities where we live and work, or anywhere in Canada or those places in the world that needs our attention. It may be our very own family. Jesus calls us to be Living Water in a scorched and dry world. Shall we offer help even when such help challenges the barriers of our assumptions and culture? Will we knock down walls—even in such a way that requires us to give up our own privileges? Are we willing to set aside time for someone regardless of our busy schedule?

Friends, Jesus invites us to be living water - gushing up and over, a wellspring of joy, hope and healing, not only for ourselves and to those we love but with those who are thirsty and hungry in the world. A few weeks from now, on another day, also about noon, Jesus will face his very own death and confess his own thirst. But today, when Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet, they conspire to bring life out of death. The water they offer each other, water that quenches the thirst of body and spirit, holds the gift of life for us all. Amen.