

The Woman at the Well

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series:
Following Jesus
Around

John 4:1-30

Jesus opens the conversation by asking for something that doesn't sound in the least bit religious: "Give me a drink" (4:7).

During January and February, we are following Jesus around the gospel of John. John's gospel features numerous in-depth conversations Jesus had with particular people. Last Sunday it was Nicodemus; today, a no-name woman at Jacob's well. The two could not be more different.

Some of their differences are obvious. One is male, the other female. By order of the Jewish Talmud, rabbis were forbidden to speak to women in public, including their own wives and daughters. That's why Jesus' disciples are astonished to find Jesus, in verse 27, conversing with a woman in public.

One is Jewish, the other is Samaritan. There were centuries of bad blood between these rival ethnic groups.

One is a religious insider, a spiritual VIP; the other is a religious outsider, a spiritual outcast.

One came to Jesus under the cover of darkness; the other encounters Jesus in broad daylight.

These two polar opposites represent the spectrum of people Jesus comes to save. We are told, in the introduction to this story, Jesus "had to go through Samaria" (4:4). He most certainly did not! He could have reached his destination by circumventing Samaria altogether. Perhaps the necessity

spoken about here is not a geographical necessity but a divine necessity. Maybe Jesus has a divine appointment to keep in Samaria!

Our story is long and involved, so let's review the highlights. Jesus is sitting alone when a woman comes to draw water from Jacob's well. Jesus opens the conversation by asking for something that doesn't sound in the least bit religious, "Give me a drink" (4:7).

The woman responds, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (4:8). If Jesus had used this Samaritan woman's drinking utensil, he would have become ceremonially unclean.

Jesus 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" (4:10).

This woman takes Jesus' words at face value. "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get this living water?" (4:11).

Jesus answers, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water I will give will become in them a spring of water, welling up to eternal life" (4:13-14).

The woman is curious now: "Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (4:15).

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Jesus says, “Go call your husband and come back.” This is getting way personal now! She answers evasively, “I have no husband” (4:17).

Jesus responds, “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” (4:17-18). Busted! She’s a five-time divorcee living with her newest boyfriend.

She responds, “Sir, I see you are a prophet” (4:19). Then, she digresses about where Samaritans worship, which is Mt. Gerazim, which is different from Jews, who worship at Mt. Zion in Jerusalem (4:20).

I suspect this conversation is making her uncomfortable, which explains why she tries to steer the conversation away from her personal life toward more innocuous questions about worship.

When Jesus sets her straight about worship (4:23-24), she responds, “I know, when the Messiah comes, he will explain everything” (4:25). This woman may be a floozy, but she knows her Bible!

Jesus says, “I am he” (4:26). The words *ego eimi* in the Greek are the identical words Jesus speaks in his seven “I am” statements. Jesus is essentially saying, I am the great I am.

Last Sunday, the conversation with Nicodemus focused on new birth. Today, it centers on new life. The operative words are “living water.” Ordinarily, we don’t speak in terms of living water. Living water flows from a stream or river

in contrast to water from a stagnant pond or cistern.

The adjective “living” is crucial to John’s gospel. Life and its cognates appear 36 times in this fourth gospel. Let me take you back to Jesus’ “I am” statements. “I am the bread of life” (6:35), “I am the light of the world; those who follow me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (8:12), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), and “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6).

Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly” (10:10). Whether we’re talking new birth or living water, Jesus’ focus is life!

The Christian life is the living of everything we know about God. We are not merely dispensing information about God. Christianity is life lived to the glory of God. To borrow Reinhold Niebuhr’s words, we are not merely interested “...in the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell.”

The Christian life is not merely reciting the words of the Apostle’s Creed, as though faith is giving verbal assent to theological propositions. Jesus’ teachings are meant to be lived! Jesus can show us how to live through the time, place and circumstances he gives us.

Jesus says in John 7 that “living water” serves as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “Let everyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’” (7:37-38). Notice the commentary John adds in verse

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39: “Now Jesus said this about the Spirit, which believers were to receive; for, as yet, there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

In the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit has become its forgotten member. Its identity is further shrouded by the old English words, Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit is none other than the presence of God, resident in Jesus Christ, which lives in every believer’s heart. The word “spirit” in the Hebrew and Greek carries the root meaning of breath and serves as a metaphor for life. When God created us, God breathed life into us and we became living souls (Genesis 2:7). God creates and sustains life. What God wants to give us is life, real life. It’s not rules God wants to give us but life. The Biblical commandments serve to support life.

You may remember the name Ponce De Leon, who sailed with explorer Christopher Columbus to discover the New World. When Columbus returned to Spain, Ponce De Leon remained as governor of Puerto Rico. He heard stories from native Indians about a magical fountain of youth, whose waters would keep people forever young, so he set sail in search of this fountain. Although some of this search is the stuff of fable, given that his primary quest was for gold, he was, nonetheless, looking for the fountain of youth when he discovered Florida. How ironic that Ponce De Leon would

lose his life searching for this fountain of youth.

Today’s lesson is a fountain of life story. This fountain dispenses living water. Come all who are thirsty. Drink from the rivers of life (Isaiah 55:1).

I used to wonder why, when this woman comes to the point of asking for living water, Jesus counters with the words, “Go and call your husband.” My first thought is that he’s shaming her by calling her out. I now believe Jesus says these things, not to shame her, but to address her deepest need. Here is someone filling her life with sex and relationships to find fulfillment. What this woman needs is not another husband; what she needs is a new life!

Like this woman, we want the new life Jesus offers, but we don’t want him rummaging around personal areas in our lives. We want him to concern himself with our religious lives, not our whole lives.

Like this woman, our lives are heavily fortified. We have proscribed areas where God can work. We want God to stay out of restricted areas.

When we entertain people in our homes, we invite them into our living room for hors d’oeuvres and to dine in our dining room. We don’t host them in less prestigious rooms, such as laundry rooms or storage rooms. Have you ever had company who inadvertently attempts to wander into rooms that are off limits? Don’t go into that room! Don’t open that closet!

When we invite Jesus into our lives, we host him in more present-

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able rooms. But he is forever wandering into unkempt rooms.

If truth be told, we want God in our lives, but we don't want to give up control. We want God, but we still want to maintain control. We want to be our own god and keep God on retainer, in case something really becomes difficult.

A little girl and her mother were listening to C.H. Spurgeon preach. The little girl leaned over to her mother and whispered, "Mother, how does he know what goes on at our house?"

Of course Spurgeon had no idea what was happening in that little girl's house, but the Spirit probes the deep things of God.

Jesus wants to live in every room in our house. Jesus doesn't want only some parts of our lives. He wants our whole lives.

Eugene Peterson planted a Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland. For the first few years, Peterson spent all his time building a congregation. Years later, his congregation built a sanctuary. After they moved into their new sanctuary, Peterson said, "We were, I thought, ready to begin. We could spend all our time and energy on our real work—worship, witness and mission. I had no reason not to suppose everyone felt the way I did. Then, I got one of the big surprises of my life. After two or three weeks of celebrative gathering in our new sanctuary, attendance began to decline. I couldn't understand what was going on. I visited the people; inquired, probed. I learned to my

dismay that nothing at all was wrong, it was just that there was nothing now to do. The challenge had been met successfully."

This is the trap we can fall into at VPC, after 11 years of construction. We have met our big challenge. There is nothing to do now. There is something for us to do—worship, witness and mission.

God offers us new life. We need renewal. Or, to use Baptist parlance, we need revival. We want 2007 to be a year of renewal. Revive us, O God. Let your Holy Spirit enliven us.

We're not done. Why, we're just getting started!

