
The Samaritan Woman at the Well (An Expository Sermon)

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Third Sunday of Lent
John 4:3-42

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

John 4:3 *Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee.* ⁴ *But he had to go through Samaria.*

Oh, Samaria! That was the strange place, the half-breed place, the place you are not supposed to visit if you are well brought up! All of us had some section of town when we were growing up that we were not supposed to visit. Two thousand years ago, that place was Samaria!

But you know what? Jesus went through it! Jesus goes through the places that we think are off-limits.

⁵ *So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.* ⁶ *Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.*

Jesus was tired. Can you imagine Jesus being tired? If he's the Son of God, what's he doing being tired?

Well, remember, Jesus shows us what it means to be truly human AND what it means to be truly God. Jesus is both. Jesus is human and Jesus is God.

This means that, no matter, what we ever feel in life, Jesus has felt it before us. Jesus knows us. When we are flat-out, dead tired, Jesus has been tired, too.

Are you tired of your journey? Are you tired of all the work you've had to do? Well, Jesus can relate. Jesus is tired, too.

⁷ *A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."* ⁸ *(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)* ⁹ *The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)*

Yes, we were all taught not to talk to strangers. And we were probably taught, implicitly, that there were some people we were just not supposed to associate with. Two thousand years ago, Jews were not supposed to speak with Samaritans.

And they were certainly not supposed to eat with them, or drink with them, or especially drink after them! That would be more than just not right. It would be unclean; it would be disgusting. For the proper Jewish man, to drink with a Samaritan would be like one of us drinking from the bottle as a wino on the street in a bad section of town. Disgusting.

Today, Americans are not supposed to speak with Koreans. North Americans are not talking with Africans.

Northern Ireland is not supposed to speak with Southern Ireland. North Atlanta is not supposed to speak with South Atlanta. Buckhead is not supposed to speak to Sandy Springs. Public schools are not supposed to speak with private schools. Democrats are not supposed to speak with Republicans.

Well, that's not the way that Jesus considered it.

Men were not even supposed to mingle with women in that culture. I don't mean co-mingle. I mean that men and women did not share the common exchanges of daily commerce and need.

But Jesus broke those rules. Jesus respected women. Jesus respected women so much that he was able to share his ordinary need with a woman; he shared his thirst.

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "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." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

Living water? What is this living water? Isn't all water living?

No, it's not all living. All of us have seen the opposite at some time or another. The opposite of living water is dead water. Some water is absolutely dead.

Some water is dead, and yet folks continue to drink it. Do you know what dead water is?

Dead water is the same old television show every night. Dead water is the same old argument you get into every day. Dead water is that little habit you persist in nourishing, that habit, which is small in itself, but which will kill you one day. Dead water is what may have nourished somebody long ago, but it sure does not give you joy and vigor today.

Dead water is that water you give for yourself which still leaves you crying out for more.

¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵ 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."

Yes! The Samaritan woman wants this water now! She knows exactly what Jesus means! Sir, give me this water!

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

Ah! The woman has no husband! Exactly. She has used up husbands the way each of us uses up unsatisfactory water. We keep trying all these ways to cure our souls. We try this self-help book. We try that therapist. We try this drug. We try that drink. We try this husband. We try that wife.

But, ultimately, we have no husband. Jesus knows that we have no husband. Jesus knows that our searching has been fruitless. Our well is dry.

¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet."

Yes, Jesus knows. Jesus knows. Prophets know. Prophets know, but they love people anyway.

²⁰ "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will

worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. It does not matter where your ancestors worshipped. Their arguments do not need to be your arguments. They were concerned with matters that are no longer a part of our lives.

True worship has to do with spirit and with truth. If you want to worship God, you must be willing to enter the realm of the Spirit. The Spirit uses history, but the Spirit is not bound to history. If you want to worship God, you must be willing to enter the realm of the Truth. Truth uses history, too, but Truth is not bound to history.

Truth is willing to acknowledge that everyone gets thirsty. No matter whether you are Jew or Samaritan, or Gentile, or Greek, or American, or Yankee or Southerner. No matter whether you are a man or a woman, or anything in between, or something else entirely, everyone gets thirsty. That is the truth.

Are you willing to worship God with the truth of who you are? If you can worship God in truth, you are in the Spirit.

²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

"I am he," Jesus said. "I am." That was the phrase that Moses heard from the burning bush. *I am who I am. I am becoming who I am becoming. I am, he.*

"I am that living water. I am that Spirit. I am that Truth, that way, that life." And Jesus speaks to us.

Jesus is speaking to you, right now, if you have ears to hear, right now, here in church, in this place, in this time, at this well.

Jesus is at the local watering hole, if you have ears to hear spirit and truth. Jesus is at the local coffee shop. Jesus is at your favorite restaurant.

Wherever you hear spirit and truth, you are hearing Jesus.

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Honey, you better believe he is the Messiah!

³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

Somehow, the townspeople were convinced! They realized immediately, from the woman (!) that something big had happened. Do you know what convinced them? It was the woman's testimony, to be sure. She had a testimony now, a witness. People believe testimonies because people recognize truth. People are convinced by what they feel, in their gut, is the truth.

But the people were also convinced by her question! That's how she ended her testimony. "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Honey, you better believe he is the Messiah!

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest?' But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal

life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." ³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

This is the Jesus we worship today. This is the Jesus we worship in Spirit and in Truth: the Savior of the World.

Amen.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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