

## John 4: 5-42

### *Dipping Deep*

**A sermon preached by**  
James F. McIntire

**Text:**  
John 4: 5-42

**March 22, 2009**  
**Lent 4**



**Hope United Methodist Church**  
Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA  
Phone: 610-446-3351  
Web: [www.HavHopeUMC.org](http://www.HavHopeUMC.org)  
Office: [HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net)  
Pastor: [HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net)

*[Jesus] 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. 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.) 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?" 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." 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!" 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 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." 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."

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



“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from (or “the spirit of”) God swept over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1-2) On the third day of creation, God separated the waters from each other and gathered the water into one place creating dry land where before there was nothing.

Water is the basic necessity of life. A human can go without eating food for 40 days – but he or she must have water. Without water we shrivel, dry up into dust, and blow away. Without water we cannot survive.

My brother called me one evening. He lives in Central Bucks County in an area without a public sewer system so he has his own well. Something happened to his well pump and he wasn't able to get water up from the well and into his house. He had to run a hose to his neighbor's house and use their well for a few days so his family could drink and cook and bathe and wash clothes. And as he told me his story, I realized how quickly we've become accustomed to our modern, urban sewer systems. We expect that we can walk to the sink, turn the faucet, and water will come streaming out. When something interrupts that, we are thrown into a dither. We act as if we've always had it that way – “water, water, everywhere.”

For much of the ancient world, though, water was not a given. And particularly for the Israelites and other nomadic peoples in the world's desert areas, water was invaluable. The water that kept them from shriveling up and blowing away with the sand was not easy to come by and it was never taken for granted. So it should come as no surprise to modern eyes and ears that stories about water took on mythic dimensions.

Stories such as that of Noah and the Great Flood – great deluge myths common in nearly every culture around the world – were taken seriously, even to the point of being elevated to the status of sacred scripture. Water was a necessity and could be a life-saving gift, but *too much* of it could be devastating so a flood was seen as an act of judgment by God. The Israelites experienced the phenomenon of flash floods rolling down *wadis* that exist throughout that part of the world. A *wadi* is something like a dry riverbed that most of the time is a harmless swath in the land. But a sudden rain will cause a *wadi* to fill quickly and a violent flood will wash away whatever is in its way – people, animals, tents, life. They exist today, even, and the nomadic Bedouin tribes still are wary of the power of a flash flood sweeping through a seemingly harmless *wadi*.

During the 40 years of wandering through the wilderness, the Israelites naturally encountered many difficulties, not a few of which were concerned with water or the lack of water. When all seemed lost and Pharaoh's chariots were rapidly approaching, Moses held out his hand over the sea – the same hand that had caused the water of the Egyptian rivers to run with blood – and God created a dry path for the Israelites to cross. The sea crashed down on Pharaoh's army and God's chosen people journeyed forward to safety. When people saw the great power of God, they were awed and they pledged their faith once again in God and in God's servant, Moses.

Yet just a short time later, the Israelites had had enough of this Moses. They were thirsty. It didn't take long. Just 3 days after crossing the Red Sea, they were unable to find suitable water – what they found was too bitter to drink. So God, through Moses, gave them the idea to put a certain kind of wood in the water which made it sweet. Problem solved. (Exodus 15)

And then 45 days from the Red Sea crossing, they were hungry and were wishing that they had stayed in Egypt. Again, God provides – bread in the morning and meat in the evening. Shortly after that at Rephidim, they begin to complain about the lack of water one again. “The people thirsted there for water;” says Exodus 17, “and the people complained against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’ So Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’” Moses did, and the people's thirst was quenched. (Exodus 17)

Water. Too much of it; too little of it. Is it any wonder then that water became such a powerful and meaningful image for this ancient people? And even thousands of years later this story in John's Gospel stands out among the Jesus stories as a lesson to be learned. To begin to hear fully John's Gospel's story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, we have to first understand a few of the details which are not so obvious to the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader.

First, the context of the encounter would have been a surprise to the initial hearers. In John 3, last week's Gospel reading, Jesus had a long and involved theological discussion with Nicodemus, an

articulate, learned leader of the Pharisees – a *man*. In chapter 4, Jesus has another long and involved theological discussion, but this time it is not with Nicodemus – not a learned Pharisee, not a man – this time with a *woman*, a *Samaritan* woman. Nicodemus was a person of high standing in his community and Jesus having a discussion with him would not have been controversial. But this woman had absolutely no standing. Yet Jesus treats her with the same respect and consideration he showed for Nicodemus. And he has with her – this Samaritan woman – for the longest-recorded conversation with anyone in all of scripture.

Second, note the time of day. John tells us that it was “about noon” when Jesus stopped to rest and the woman came out to the well. This is strange, because women did not come to the well in the hottest part of the day. Rather, they came out at dawn or dusk because it was easier to carry home the heavy jars of water when the temperature was cooler. Apparently, this woman does not want to associate with other women, or they do not want to associate with her.

Third, Jesus *speaks* to her: "Give me a drink." In the first century Jewish men did not even speak to their wives in public, much less would they speak to women outside their own family. Here Jesus addresses a woman to whom he is not related, a Samaritan, and (as emerges in their conversation) a woman of dubious reputation. More than anything else, this little story of the Samaritan woman illustrates Jesus' willingness to transgress social boundaries.

Fourth, remember that Jesus has no cup of his own. He will drink from her cup. A Samaritan cup. Judeans despised Samaritans. The Samaritans resisted Ezra's and Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple and eventually they built their own temple on Mt. Gerazim. The Judeans insisted that the Samaritans were of mixed race since they had intermarried with

the colonial occupiers, the Assyrians when they were conquered in 722 BCE. Imagine 1950s Birmingham, Alabama – a brown-skinned Jesus asking to drink from a water fountain that had a sign, “Whites Only”

But maybe the most telling and poignant detail is that "the woman left her water jar." Of course, this could just be accidental. In her excitement she could have forgotten the heavy jar. But in the same way I watch a movie knowing that anything in there is there for a purpose otherwise the director would have left it out, I suspect that the author here is telling us something. This nameless Samaritan woman had asked Jesus for living water. How appealing that must have sounded to a woman who day after day had to go to the well at the peak of the sun's heat when she could avoid the company of others. The woman left the heavy jar behind, the author implies, because she no longer needed it; she had received the gift Jesus promised – living water.

“Jesus, what are you doing?” Imagine the dismay of his disciples when they returned – they never said anything about it, John tells us – but what they must have thought. “Jesus, don't you realize what they'll say? What about the grapevine – won't everyone be talking behind our backs? You did it now, Jesus. So much for any chance we had of success.”

Jesus looked past this person's sexual identity, past her racial difference, past her questionable morality, past every category into which humans cram each other, and saw simply a person – a child of God created in the image of God. He saw a person with problems and struggles, a person with normal, human dilemmas. She wasn't just a Samaritan, a rival to every self-respecting Judean. She was someone who needed water to survive, just like anyone else, including Jesus himself.

What are you doing, Jesus?

“To ask a simple thing of the enemy is to become vulnerable,” says one writer reflecting on this passage, “It is to change the dynamic between the conflicting parties and for a moment it opens out the possibility of a larger exchange.” (“Jesus Hustles an Invitation to the City.” Proclaiming Gospel Justice: Reflections on the Scriptures and Progressive Spirituality, *The Witness*, 2005.)

Jesus and the Samaritan woman are enemies by the world’s standards. They are not “supposed” to like each other or even talk to each other. Yet they have deeper and deeper conversation and neither is put off by the exchange. What was once enmity was replaced by wonder – Jesus wonders, the woman wonders, the disciples wonder, the Samaritans wonder. What was hostility between a divided people became invitation: “they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days” (John 4:40).

Can we, like Jesus, ask a simple thing of our “enemies” and become vulnerable? And in the encounter can we learn something new? We in the Church tend to be put off by the ways of the world and we become isolated islands of faith in the sea of materialism. We hang figurative signs out front, “Christians Welcome Here,” and when they come we offer them food and drink, prayer and fellowship, but we offer it on our terms. People are welcome to be like us. The sign is clear: this is a place of godliness in the midst of ungodliness. It is not a place of vulnerability. Some will come, but so many more will stay away. And we scratch our heads wondering why our pews are empty.

But here in this Jesus story we have a hint about another way. When the church seeks to be invited into the lives of those outside our walls, new ways of being reconciled arise. How do we work to see that a new metaphorical sign is in place in the shops and apartments and houses that surround us? – “*Everyone Welcome Here.*” We begin by being vulnerable, by asking in small and

personal ways to be let into the lives of people around us who are not like us – people who we might not even *like* very much.

We witness in this story the gift of God for all God’s children. In the vulnerability of this encounter, we discover that our communities are interdependent – Jesus is dependent on this Samaritan woman if he wants to drink, the woman is dependent on Jesus if she wants to know of the eternal water. We learn of Jesus’ insistence upon relationship and the breaking down of barriers. Jesus shows us a new way to learn about one another, learn the truth of one another, and learn that we need one another. True worship takes place not at a sacred mountain, he says, or even a shared ancestral well, but in a relationship with the person of Christ, who is the well of hope and the mountain of peace. (“Unlikely Messenger,” Patricia Farris, *The Christian Century*, 2002. *Religion Online*)

Jesus wants us to know God in a new way. We so often think of God as a personal connection to whatever we desire – a genie in a bottle. But the God that Jesus announced is not one of a privatized faith whose purpose is to guarantee personal peace and affluence. God’s reign does not bring with it what sociologist Christian Smith of the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) aptly laments as “the god of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” who is like a “Divine Butler” with the responsibility of making us feel good. Jesus proclaimed that God longs to satisfy not our every personal want, but to quench the thirst of those who are outcast – to quench the deepest *spiritual* thirst of the morally, spiritually, religiously, and economically least and lost.

I don’t know about you, but that’s a dead-on description of me; one who is among the morally, spiritually, religiously, and economically least and lost. Can we admit that Jesus offers to each of us the water of eternal life? Can we accept that about ourselves? Can we admit that not only are we to join the work to

which Jesus calls the righteous – to feed and quench those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – but also to admit that they are we as well?

We need to stop treating God like our Divine Butler and identify more fully with the Samaritan woman this season. We are in the wilderness of Lent. We hunger and we thirst. We are among the least and the lost. We journey from the dust and ashes of Ash Wednesday to the light and life of Easter morning. Along the way we are hungry and thirsty, we are dry and struggling. This season we must find ourselves at the well, dipping deep in, reaching for healing and reconciliation, hope and peace. In these 40 days we need be searching for renewal in our relationship with God.

A human can go 40 days without food, but not without water. Water gives us life. Jesus asks the woman for water – nothing more. What he – and she – got was considerably more than water. They received in the encounter a new way of being alive, a new relationship, a new way to understand God. They each received from the other the water of eternal life.

Lent is a time to dip deep down into that well again, to pull out more than the water that quenches our dry throats, but to pull out the living water that quenches our spiritual thirst. As we journey away from the ashes and toward the light, drink of the only living water that will quench your thirst. Drink of the well of God.

Amen.