

*Revelation 21:1-6*

*John 4:1-42*

*September 21, 2014*

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

*Tell Me the Stories of Jesus*

**THE WOMAN AT THE WELL**

*Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

Once upon a time . . . a boy traveled to a foreign land. The boy met a girl at a well. One of them drew water from the well. The boy helped the girl in her time of trouble. The boy and girl fell in love. The boy and girl got married. The boy and girl shared a meal with her family and the community. The boy and girl lived happily ever after.

That's how Isaac met Rebekah. (Genesis 24)

That's how Jacob met Rachel. (Genesis 29)

That's how Moses met Zipporah. (Exodus 2)

That's how Jesus met the Samaritan woman . . .

No, wait a minute. Jesus did travel to a foreign land (Samaria). Jesus did meet the woman at the well. The woman did draw water from the well (but it wasn't the water or the well she had expected when she went to town at high noon). Jesus did help the woman in her time of trouble. Perhaps the Samaritan woman lived happily ever after. Obviously Jesus and the woman at the well didn't get married. But can we so emphatically say that she didn't fall in love with Jesus as her Savior and Messiah?<sup>1</sup>

This wonderful story follows the pattern of the Old Testament stories of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Zipporah. Except — except that Jesus' meal is do the will of God and to complete God's work. Except — except that, instead of just one person being helped by the well, an entire community is saved. Except — except, instead of looking for a wife, Jesus meets a woman who has been married five times . . .

We know all about the woman at the well, don't we? She's been married five times. She's living with a man who is not her husband. We know what kind of woman would do that. She is so ashamed in her Samaritan community, she goes to the well in the heat of the day at noon so she can avoid the stares and the whispers of her neighbors. Oh, yes, we know all about "that woman."

Or do we? The story does tell us the woman had been married five times and that she was living with a man who was not her husband. The story does tell us she went to the well at high noon. And that's *all* the story

tells us about the woman at the well. There is nothing in the story about her being “*that* kind of woman” (a woman of ill repute, a loose woman, a prostitute). There is nothing in the story about *why* she is living with a man who is not her husband. There is nothing in the story about *why* she was at the well in the middle of the day.

Whatever characteristics or motivations we give to the woman at the well are just that — what *we* have decided. And we’re in good company, since theologians, biblical scholars, and church fathers have, for centuries, considered the woman at the well to be some kind of morally flawed individual.

But what if we filled in the story with a different set of details. Once upon a time . . . a woman went to the well in the middle of town. She was very old and had had a sad life. She had outlived her five husbands, four of whom had been brothers of her first husband. Every time one of her husbands died, she got married off to another brother in the family, according to the custom and law of her time. Who knows why she wasn’t married to the man she was living with when she went to the well that day? Maybe she had given up hope after five other marriages. Maybe it’s because that, in such “Levirate” marriages, you might not really be considered “married” to the man.

And who knows? Maybe the woman went to the well at high noon because she knew it would be less crowded. Maybe she was willing to put up with the heat of the day in order not to have to stand in line and wait to dip her water jar in the well. Or maybe she went to the well at noon, not to escape the stares and whispers about being “that kind of woman,” but to avoid the sympathy and head-shaking of her neighbors at her sad life.

Of course, we really don’t have any way of knowing that’s who the woman at the well was or what her life was like. But why assume the worst about her, when the story doesn’t tell us anything like that, and Jesus himself doesn’t spend any time talking with her about any moral lapses? Whatever her situation, there’s one thing we do know about this woman at the well — she was a pretty canny theologian!

Let’s go back and hear the story again, only this time according to the customs of the day.

Once upon a time . . . Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water. When she saw Jesus, a Jewish man, sitting by the well, she turned around and hurried away (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans).

Talk about a “short” story! Perhaps we could draw it out just a little bit. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” So the Samaritan woman meekly dropped her head, drew some water from the well in her water jar, set it on the rim of the well, and hurried away. That’s still a pretty “short” story!

But this story of the woman at the well is the longest recorded conversation Jesus had with anyone in any of the four gospels. The back-and-forth between Jesus and the woman gets theological right from the get-go, when the woman asks Jesus, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” They say you should never talk about religion or politics if you want to have a nice conversation, but she raises both subjects — and tosses in the race/ethnicity question to boot.

As the conversation goes along, Jesus and the woman go deeper and deeper theologically. Who are the true Jews? Where is the true place of worship? Who is Messiah? When will he come? All of these big theological questions come from her very first question: “How can you ask me for a drink of water? Don’t you know it’s against the law and all of our customs for us to be talking out here in public, much less to share a drink of water?” It’s almost as if there needed to be two signs there at the well: one for “Jews Only” and another for “Samaritans Only.”

Are you listening to the story? Do you have ears to hear?

On Thursday afternoon, Lee Woodard and Bill Butler set up a mini-recording studio in my study, complete with lights and a microphone. Through the wonder of Skype, Bill and Lee recorded a conversation between me and Rev. George Anderson, who was in Roanoke, Virginia. George will be the keynote speaker at our Sound Retreat January 30 - February 1 of next year. He will share his thoughts about “Conversations with Jesus” from the Gospel of John.

As George and I talked, he shared his enthusiasm for these conversations in John’s gospel. He said, “They reach out and grab us and invite us in. They’re not just quick little stories — Jesus heals somebody and then it’s over. Instead, we get to listen in as Jesus talks with some very interesting characters — the woman at the well, Nicodemus, Peter, God, and the church. When Jesus talks with the people, there is a misunderstanding; that often leads to an even bigger misunderstanding; then to an even bigger misunderstanding. Then, somehow, the conversation takes an unexpected turn and we’re invited to become a part of the conversation.” I told George, “I know exactly what you’re talking about, and thanks for the inspiration. As soon as we hang up, I’m going to write my sermon about the woman at the well.” In classic George Anderson fashion, he said, “Well, don’t preach too good a sermon, because then

people won't get anything out of what I say at the retreat!"

So, how can we hear this story for our lives today? Whether you think of the woman as morally loose or the victim of life's circumstances, one thing is for certain. She had to go get water every day from the village well (maybe even several times a day). In the midst of her challenging life (whatever happened), she was caught in the sameness and drudgery of fetching water. You can hear it in her voice when she says, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Is that where you find yourself today — in the midst of the challenges of your life and caught up in the sameness and drudgery of "fetching water"? If so, then listen to what Jesus says to you today: "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (Jn. 4:14) And if you drink deeply from that living water and get refreshed, what will you do now?

Thanks to James Sills and the other LOGOS children, we can all see (and hear) this story in a new way. In our Worship Skills class on Wednesday nights at LOGOS, the children have been acting out the stories of Jesus and illustrating them. James' picture is on the front of today's bulletin. You can see the other pictures on the West wall in the Fellowship Hall. I love the picture that Trey drew. The woman is standing at the well, but Jesus is nowhere to be seen. However, there are two conversation bubbles. One of them comes from down in the well, and it says, "I will give living water and you will never thirst again." And the bubble over the woman's head simply says, "Sure." Don't you love it? "Sure." The woman at the well got more than she bargained for or even imagined that day, at noon, at the village well. She came to fill up her water jar. She went away, her life filled up with living water gushing up to eternal life.

There's one sentence a little over halfway through the story that you might pass by without much thought: "Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city." Why did she leave her water jar? As someone said the other day, maybe she realized there were more important things to take care of now that she had met Jesus! Bingo! Because of her (she is really "the first Christian female preacher), her village believe in Jesus and "know that this is truly the Savior of the world." The woman came to fill her jar with water that would last an hour or two. She went back to her village without her jar, but she had become a jar full of living water which she shared with her neighbors. And what a difference it made!

From Revelation 21, we heard these words of the risen Lord: “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” We don’t have to wait until some day in the future to have our thirst quenched. When we drink deeply from the well that is Jesus Christ, we will have plenty of gushing-up water to share with other people who are thirsty and tired of “fetching water” that only quenches for a little while.

Did you know you were going to hear a story about mission and witnessing today? And we’ll sing about this story for our lives a little later in the service: “Lord, let me be Your instrument, spreading sunshine in the land; let people see Your works in me; help me live the best I can. Fill my cup, let it overflow; fill my cup, let it overflow; fill my cup, let it overflow; let it overflow with love.”<sup>2</sup>

***Let us pray: We thank you and praise you, O God, that however we may thirst, whatever we may need to satisfy our souls, you offer it freely and abundantly in Christ. So we drink deeply of the living water and, as we draw from your wells, we seek to pass the cup to others who, like us, are thirsty for your grace. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*, for these Old Testament references.

<sup>2</sup>*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, Hymn #750, “Fill My Cup.”