

"A Warm Well Come"

Encountering Christ, part 2

John 4:7-26

You are in the right place this morning. Maybe it was a real struggle to get here this morning – physically, spiritually, emotionally. God knows. And God sees you here. You are not alone. We are the church together. So take a good look around you. These people sitting around you are not perfect, but they are here to worship God with you.

Would you please pray with me?

God, you alone are good. You alone are worthy of praise. Forgive us for the times when we simply forget who you are. We want to worship you this morning with everything that we have. We ask that you come and meet us in this place. Bring down your holy fire and refine us to be more like your son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

When have you been really thirsty? I remember a day in Phoenix, Arizona, when Katja and I attempted to climb Camelback Mountain. It was about 9 o'clock in the morning, in June, the hottest part of the year in the desert southwest. Literally, every day that entire week had a high temperature of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Between the two of us, we had one 8-ounce bottle of water and the sun was rising. Fortunately, Katja had better sense than I, and after 100 feet or so, we turned back to the comfort of our air-conditioned car. If it had been up to me, I might have shriveled up like a raisin in the heat!

Water is important. It is a basic necessity for life. And there are few things worse than being physically thirsty. However, we can also be emotionally and spiritually thirsty. Help me out: What things can we be spiritually thirsty for?

(Audience participation.) Love. Acceptance. Forgiveness. A second chance. Community. Purpose. Peace. Contentment. Chocolate chip cookies. (OK, the last one doesn't count.)

Like us, a lot of people who encountered Jesus in the Bible were spiritually thirsty, longing for these very things we just named. An encounter with Jesus does provide us with the things we thirst for. After meeting Jesus, we should desire to share those things with others, quenching their thirst as well.

I love this story in John chapter 4, of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. This is a cross-cultural conversation. Have you ever had one of those? In Germany, I had a few. It is hard to understand someone whose customs and language are so different. Sometimes those conversations are amusing, because of minor misunderstandings and incorrect words. My best/worst example was when I tried singing a song with the words "Dew of Heaven", but because of a slip of the tongue, I said, "Heavenly traffic jam."

Cross-cultural dialogue can also be frustrating. Frankly, a conversation about faith is cross-cultural. It can involve confusion and frustration. Usually, the best place to start is by talking about something you both have in common, like being thirsty.

Jesus meets this Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus is tired, hot. He sees the woman coming, and so he asks her for water.

Maybe this simple request doesn't seem unusual to you, but then maybe you don't know about the extreme hatred between Jews and Samaritans. According to the Jews, the Samaritans were the half-breed traitors who did everything "backwards". After exile by the Assyrians some 700 years earlier, the

Samaritans had intermarried and developed worship practices that were similar to Judaism, but in the eyes of a faithful Jew, were all wrong.

These two cultures didn't associate with one another. (John 4:9) Literally, if you're a good Jew, you didn't eat from the same dishes as Samaritans. You didn't buy their products. You boycotted the whole stinkin' country. In fact, Jesus' presence at the well is a complete surprise to begin with. John 4:4 says Jesus "had to go" through Samaria, but he could have taken the long way around the coast and avoided these people. But he doesn't. He sits down at the well, and he starts the conversation with the simplest question: "Can I have a drink?"

Jesus liked crossing lines. In addition to the cross-cultural divide, it was taboo for a man to talk to a woman. So naturally, this Samaritan woman is surprised. She points out, "Your kind doesn't associate with my kind. A Jewish man asks a Samaritan woman for a drink?!" To paraphrase: "Is you crazy?"

Now he really has her attention. So he begins to speak about spiritual things. He says, "If you knew who I was, you would ask me for living water."

This is the first misunderstanding. Laughing, she asks, "Where will you get this 'living water?' You have no bucket, no rope."

Remember, this was before modern plumbing. The well may have been over 100 feet deep. It's not like Jesus was asking someone at the table to pass the water pitcher. This is a major undertaking.

The woman doesn't understand who Jesus is. "Who do you think you are? Are you better than Jacob, our great ancestor? He built this well, and his family used it." There is a note of challenge in her voice.

Jesus doesn't give up. He presses on, focusing on the benefits of living water. "Drink here, and you'll be thirsty again. Drink living water, and you will

never thirst.” He’s using metaphorical language, of course. This living water is abundant, vigorous, “springing-up.” He is telling her about eternal life.

Intrigued, she thinks, “That would be great. I’d love to have this living water and stop coming here all the time.”

Stop and think for a moment. Why is she even there? Obviously, to get water. But why come at noon, the hottest part of the day, to draw water, alone, from a well over 100 feet deep? More than likely, she was avoiding people. She had something to hide.

Jesus says, “Go call your husband and come back.” (John 4:16) I believe her response indicates her true feelings. “I have no husband.” Can you sense her shame? Her embarrassment? Not all is as it seems. All she can say is, “I have no husband.” I’ll bet she didn’t even look Jesus in the eye as she said it.

Jesus doesn’t berate her. He doesn’t accuse her. He tells her, “You told the truth.” And then, prophetically, he speaks into her life. “You have had five husbands, and you live with a man who is not your husband.” (my paraphrase of John 4:17-18)

Here’s what I imagine Jesus means: “I know – you were divorced. Your first husband cheated on you. Afterwards, you thought, ‘It was his fault. Just my bad luck.’ Your second husband abused you, then left you. Then you started to think, ‘Maybe it’s me.’ Your life started to crumble. The third one didn’t work out. By the fourth and the fifth man, you didn’t care anymore. The talk was getting to you. The whispers. The people saying stuff behind your back. You couldn’t deal with it anymore. You were ashamed. You thought you were worthless, a failure. You came to the well alone, because at least it’s better than facing all of that.”

Jesus doesn't point the finger. He just tells the truth. He's working his way to redeem her.

Uncomfortable, she changes the subject. "OK, I get it. I know you're a prophet. Tell me something, Jew-man. My ancestors worshipped on this mountain. You Jews say we are supposed to worship in Jerusalem. Who is right?" (My paraphrase of John 4:19-20)

She is thinking, "Go ahead, tell me the Jews are right. Tell me I'm supposed to worship at the temple. Add more to my load. I'm a woman, so I can't go in the inside of the temple. I'm a Samaritan, and foreigners aren't allowed in, either. Go ahead, hit me with your best shot, so I can fire back at you. At least I'll have someone to blame for not getting to God."

Jesus surprises her. He offers her living water, not excuses. "The Mountain versus the Temple? It's neither-nor. Salvation may originate from the Jews, but it's open to all. The time has come for worshippers to seek God in Spirit and truth. That's who God seeks."

Spirit and truth. Together, both-and. Crossing boundaries and barriers between people and God. You know, our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who transform the world, together, not alone. We all can worship God, right now, in truth and Spirit, and we all can make disciples together.

The Samaritan woman didn't want to keep hiding. Her deepest longing was to be saved. To have living water. To be redeemed. To be restored to her community. She says, "When the Messiah comes, he will explain everything." That is a sentence filled with hope. I can almost see her shaking with excitement. Is she setting herself up for disappointment again, or will this finally be the one she has been waiting for?

Jesus simply says, "I who speak to you am he."

Jesus is the Messiah, the savior of the world. He came for everyone. This is the truth that we need to preach from every church. Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, for all. Those are his words. He said it, and he meant it.

How we deliver this truth makes a world of difference. Do we take the time to sit at the well and listen, and speak the truth in the Spirit, to call everyone to worship God?

Can I ask you, who is your Samaritan? Who are the people, if you are honest, you would rather avoid than talk to? Whom do avoid looking into their face, meeting their eyes? What do they do that drives you nuts? Is it their lifestyle? How they handle their money, or lack of it? What they wear? How they talk? Their addictions? Their personal preferences? Their orientation?

We are not condoning anyone's choices. Jesus did not affirm this woman's brokenness; he just met her where she was. He sat down at the well and talked to her. He said, "I have something to offer you that the world does not. Hope. Life. Abundance. Joy. Living Water."

Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. She was no longer ashamed. She chose to engage the very people she had avoided, admitting her past. That is truly amazing.

If you ask, God will reveal to you the Samaritan in your life. God is calling you to sit with them at the well. God wants to give them, and you living water.

Are you thirsty for an encounter with Jesus? It may be uncomfortable and awkward at first, because he knows everything about us. But instead of shame, we can feel forgiveness. Instead of hate, we can receive love. Instead of excuses, we can find new life, living water springing up inside our hearts.

As a church, we must commit to finding ways to spend some time at the well. The opportunities are all around us, if we pray and open our eyes. People are desperately lonely right now. We have a perfect opportunity to call on them. Everywhere, people are thirsty for life, and you can bring them to the living water. All it takes is faith.

Let us pray.

Memory verse

"Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." John 4:14 (NIV)

Reflection questions

1. Reflect on a time when you were really thirsty. How did you quench your thirst?
2. When Jesus talks about "living water", what does that mean to you? What types of spiritual thirst does Jesus quench in your life?
3. Have you ever encountered someone from a different culture? What did you talk about? Was there any awkwardness or misunderstanding?
4. "Sitting with the stranger at the well" is a metaphor for evangelism. Have you ever sat down with someone to talk about salvation?
5. Who in your life needs a drink of living water? How can you pray for them and share it with them?