

The Woman at the Well

John 4:5–26

The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." (John 4:25–26)

It's only in recent years that I've learned to appreciate the Samaritan woman at the well, because her story wasn't one of my favorites growing up. The problem wasn't with the narrative itself; it was with the way preachers often mistreated its central character. Long before I was old enough to read John's Gospel for myself, I "knew" that the woman at the well was promiscuous and immoral. In the version I learned, the good news of the story resided in Jesus's shocking condescension: "God *even* forgives the sins of *such a woman!*"

The fact is, nowhere in the narrative is the Samaritan woman described as promiscuous. Nowhere does Jesus call her a sinner (sexual or otherwise), or tell her (as he tells so many others) to "go and sin no more." This is not a story about morality. It is not a story about Jesus liberating a woman from her own sex life. It is a story about Jesus revealing himself as the Messiah to a fellow human being in whom he sees genuine spiritual hunger, a learned and engaged mind, and a tremendous gift for preaching, evangelism, and apostleship.

Let's begin with what the story actually is. For starters, Jesus's dialogue with the woman at the well is his longest recorded conversation in the New Testament. He talks to the Samaritan woman longer than he talks to his twelve disciples, his critics, or even his own family members. Moreover, she is the first person (and the first ethnic and religious outsider) to whom Jesus reveals his identity in John's Gospel. And—this might be the most significant fact of all—she is the first believer in any of the Gospels to become an evangelist and bring her entire city to a saving experience

of Jesus. So much for fallen women! How I wish I'd heard these bits of the story amplified when I was a little girl.

As I rethink the encounter now and allow its richness and nuance to wash over me, I'm noticing grace in very different places than I used to. In particular, I'm finding good news I can carry forward into my own life. Here are some examples of what I see:

Jesus breaks religious and cultural rules to make the encounter possible. By the time Jesus meets the woman at the well, the enmity between Jews and Samaritans is ancient, entrenched, and bitter. The two groups disagree about everything that matters: how to honor God, how to interpret sacred texts, and how and where to worship. They practice their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoid social contact with each other whenever possible.

Moreover, the Samaritan is a woman, and it is not customary or appropriate for Jesus—a Jewish man—to converse alone with a Samaritan woman, much less to ask her for a drink of water. That sort of thing is not done.

To put this in more contemporary language, the Samaritan woman is the Other. The alien, the outsider, the heretic, the stranger. She represents all the boundaries that must not be transgressed in the religious life, all the spiritual taboos that must not be broken. But Jesus breaks them, anyway.

Is there anything we can do in our contemporary lives to recover the scandal at the heart of this story? Because its heart *is* a scandal. Not a sexual scandal, but a spiritual one. The enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans in Jesus's day is not theoretical; it's embodied and real. The differences between them are not easily negotiated; each is fully convinced that the other is wrong. What Jesus does when he enters into conversation with a Samaritan woman is radical and risky; it stuns his own disciples, because it asks them to dream of a different kind of social and religious order. A different kind of kingdom.

Jesus's willingness to break the rules compels us, his followers, to live into the truth that people are more than the sum of their political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. Jesus calls us to put aside the stereotypes we carry, the prejudices we nurse, the social and cultural lines we draw. He invites us to look at the Samaritan woman and see a sister and an apostle, not a harlot, a heretic, a foreigner, or a threat.

Where might God be calling you to break a rule? Transgress a boundary? Embrace a stranger? What lines has Jesus crossed in order to find you?

Jesus leads with vulnerability. As John describes the scene, Jesus is sitting by a well in the desert heat at high noon. He's "tired out" from his long journey, and he's all by himself. Along comes a woman with a water jar, and the first thing Jesus says to her is, "Give me a drink" (John 4:7).

I had to sit with this moment in the story for a long while before its irony and strangeness really struck me. The Son of God is thirsty at the mouth of a well, and it's the outcast whom no one else wants to interact with who provides the water he needs. How long, I wonder, does Jesus sit there with his parched throat and dry lips, longing for water? The wilderness at noon is no joke; people die of thirst out there. Do any echoes of his temptation in the wilderness come back to him as he leans over the well and smells the fresh coolness far below? (Matt 4:3: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.") Surely if the Messiah wants to, he can access the water himself. But he waits. He waits so that when the woman appears, she can recognize the incarnate Messiah in his vulnerability, his humanity, his need.

It's a remarkable moment. How often, in contrast, do we plunge into ministry with a sense of complete self-sufficiency? How hard do we work to hide our needs and our weaknesses, as if what's most human and authentic about us must be walled off for the sake of a more impressive "witness"? How stubbornly do we insist that we have everything to offer others, without recognizing how much they have to offer us?

Jesus wins the woman's trust by humbling himself. By naming his own thirst. By asking for something she can give. There is no triumphalism in his approach, no smugness, no arrogance. He's thirsty and he says so. Of course, we know that as Jesus's story plays out, he will once again thirst in a lonely place at noon, and once again ask for water. On that terrible day, he will receive only the mockery of vinegar from the foot of his cross. On *this* day by the well, however, Jesus's disarming honesty opens the door for a spiritual seeker to find new life and then share that new life with her entire city.

Jesus tells the truth without shaming. The conversation between Jesus and the woman pivots when he tells her what he knows about her life: "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. What you have said is true!" (John 4:17-18).

This is the "sordid" revelation commentators often point to when they try to make a case for the woman's sexual wantonness. But there are any number of reasons why the Samaritan woman might have the past she has. Perhaps she was married off as a child bride, then widowed and passed along among her dead husband's brothers, as per the "Levirate marriage" practice of the day. Maybe her various husbands abandon her because she's ill, disabled, or infertile. Maybe she's a victim of abuse. Whatever the case, we know that in first century Palestine, women don't have the legal power to end their own marriages—the authority to file for divorce rests with men alone.

There's a great deal we can't know about the woman's history. What we can infer is that she prefers to be invisible. For whatever reason, she doesn't expect the other women in town to accept her, so she heads to the well in the scorching heat of the day instead of in the cool of the morning. She hopes to come and go, undetected, carrying around in isolation whatever trauma, wound, sin, fear, or desperation her complicated history has left her with.

But then Jesus comes along and sees her. He sees the whole of her. The past. The present. The future. Who she has been. What she yearns for. How she hurts. All that she might become. And he names it all.

But he names it all without shaming, castigating, or condemning her. He sees and names the woman in a way that makes her feel not judged, but loved. Not exposed, but shielded. Not diminished, but restored. He doesn't shy away from the painful, ugly, broken stuff in her life. Instead, he allows the truth of who she is to rise to the surface. "Let's name what's real," he tells her. "Let's confess what *is*. No more games. No more smokescreens. No more posturing. I see you for who you are, and I love you. Now see who I am. The Messiah. The one in whom you can find freedom, love, healing, and transformation. Spirit and Truth. Eternal life. Living Water. Drink of me, and live."

Just as he does for the Samaritan woman, Jesus invites us to see ourselves and each other through eyes of love, not judgment. Can we, like Jesus, become soft landing places for people who are all alone, carrying stories of humiliation too heavy to bear? Can we see and name the world's brokenness without shaming? Can we tell the truth and honor each other's dignity at the same time?

Jesus endorses the woman's proclamation. When Jesus tells the Samaritan woman who he is, she leaves her water jar at the well, runs back to her city, and says, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (John 4:29).

There's so much to love about this moment. I love that in her excitement, the woman forgets all about her water jar. I love that her need to share her sacred experience overwhelms her desire to remain anonymous and invisible. I love that her history—once the source of such pain and secrecy—becomes the evidence she uses to proclaim Jesus's identity. I love that she says, "Come and see," recognizing that Jesus can't be reduced to secondhand summary. I love that she shares her experience of Jesus even though her faith is still young and in process. ("He cannot be the Messiah, can he?") Even her questions become a part of her truth-telling. Even her curiosity becomes a tool that arouses the curiosity of others.

Most of all, I love that Jesus honors, blesses, and validates the woman's proclamation. John writes that Jesus stays in the woman's city for two days, so

that everyone who hears her testimony can meet him directly and see that the woman is a reliable witness. She, like John the Baptist, like the Apostles, like Mary Magdalene, like Paul, “prepares the way of the Lord,” and Jesus encourages her to do so. “Many Samaritans from that city,” the Gospel writer tells us, “believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39).

Who is speaking good news into your life? How are you receiving their testimony? In the most unlikely places, through the most unexpected voices, from the minds and bodies of the disempowered and the overlooked, God speaks, and living water flows. May we have ears to hear, hearts to receive, and courage to share what we are given.