

John 4:1-26

We are continuing this morning in our series on the Gospel of John, picking up at the beginning of chapter 4 and working through to verse 26 of that same chapter. If you have a Bible you may want to turn to that passage or you may simply make use of the verses printed in your bulletin.

In this Gospel the author - who is John the Apostle - has initially concentrated his energies on helping his readers, especially his Jewish audience, to get a clear picture of Jesus' identity and, alongside that, a clear sense of what it means to respond appropriately TO Jesus, in light of who he actually is.

In chapter 3 we saw Jesus interact with a prominent, well-educated and respected person in the culture of his day: Nicodemus - a man who was on the Jewish ruling council - the Sanhedrin. We saw him make it clear to Nicodemus that in spite of his learning and regardless of his Jewish heritage that if he wanted to see the kingdom of God something more was required - he had to be "born again" or "born from above" - i.e., he had to have undergone a transformation that only the Spirit of God can effect within a person.

This transformation is not something that can be predicted or controlled - although it can be seen - like when the unseen wind moves the leaves on a tree. So too does this unseen work of God reveal itself in people in ways that *can* be seen - most notably here in the form of a person believing in Jesus, as the Son of God, sent to save sinners.

In looking at chapter 3 we saw, of course, the well-known John 3:16 which made clear - to an undoubtedly surprised Nicodemus - that the salvation and eternal life that Jesus came to bring was not only to be available to one race or heritage but was to go beyond that. Indeed, it was wide enough to encompass the whole world.

Here in chapter 4 we see the immediate demonstration of all this as Jesus goes from inviting Nicodemus to come out of the darkness and into the light to inviting an outcast, sinful, *nameless* Samaritan woman to do the same. To be sure, in chapter 4 his invitation involves different images and metaphors - but the purpose and intent are identical. That's what we'll be looking at this morning. Before we go any further, let's pray together....

(Pray)

Now before I actually *read* the text to you, and because this is a familiar story and thus in danger of being hijacked by our previous readings of it, I want to give you a brief bit of *background* information about the Jews and the Samaritans which, hopefully, will help you to hear this story a little better.

If you know anything about the plotline of the Old Testament, you may remember that historically there was a great split that took place within the nation of Israel. The nation was united throughout the reign of its first three kings - Saul, David and Solomon - but after Solomon there was a conflict resulting in a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom, with two separate monarchies. Along with the separate monarchies there also developed separate places of worship. In the south it was centered around Jerusalem and in the north, it centered around Samaria and in particular around Mt Gerizim which had historical connections to Abraham and Jacob, as well as other connections.

Eventually, the northern kingdom, after a series of bad kings led the nation away from God, and after their ignoring a number of prophets warning them of the danger they were in, after all of that - the northern kingdom was invaded by the Assyrians and taken into captivity. But not *everyone* was taken away. A small remnant of Jews remained in the land to occupy the territory and to that small number of Jews was added a whole bunch of other people from various nations. This resulted over time, in the inevitable mixing of races.

Additionally, these other people brought with them their own “gods” and added the worship of those gods to the worship of Yahweh that was going on among the remaining Jews. Over time, however, the initial polytheism faded away and the exclusive worship of Yahweh once again marked the region - but with some significant differences.

Because they had cut themselves off from the goings on in the south, these northern “Samaritans” also cut themselves off from the continuing revelation of God that was enshrined in the historical books (like Samuel and Kings), the wisdom literature (like the Proverbs and Psalms) and the writing prophets (like Isaiah, etc.). In short, the Samaritans only regarded the first 5 books of the bible as having any authority which, effectively, gave them a very limited perspective on God’s redemptive purposes and, indeed, on God *himself*.

Of course the southern kingdom had its own problems and they too were carried off into captivity not too many years after the northern kingdom. But their captivity was rather short-lived and many of them were allowed to return to their land. When they *did* return the Samaritans offered to help them rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, but they refused and, to add insult to injury, a number of years later the southern Jews managed to enter Samaria and burn down their temple on Mt Gerizim in 128 BC.

As a result, by the time Jesus came into the picture, the Samaritans and Jews had a well-entrenched hatred for one another which occasionally blossomed into violence.

All of this is part of the background that, hopefully, will shed some light on particular aspects of this story. So, let me now read the passage to you and, as I do, please listen for how some of this history comes into play in the interaction between Jesus and this woman....

(Read John 4:1-26)

In the opening of this story we see Jesus packing his bags and moving away from Judea and toward Galilee, most likely because he doesn't want there to develop any sense of rivalry between himself and John the Baptist and also because the presence of two such ministries in close proximity had attracted the attention of the local religious leaders - the Pharisees - and Jesus did not want or need to raise their suspicions any more than was necessary at this early point in his ministry.

Well, the text says that in order to get to Galilee Jesus "had" to pass through Samaria which, if you were in a hurry, certainly would have been the quickest way to go. To be sure, there *was* another way to get to Samaria, a much longer way. But the greek text, according to the scholars, seems to suggest that Jesus really *was* in a hurry. So he went the quickest way.

So off Jesus goes and soon finds himself near a town called Sychar by which could be found a well that had some significant historical connections to two OT patriarchs - Jacob and Joseph. The time is about noon. It's dusty, it's hot. His disciples have gone into the nearby town to get some food and Jesus has apparently stayed behind by himself, and is sitting on the ground beside this well.

And then this woman shows up.

Now that fact, by itself, is worth considering since back then, because of the conditions of that region, people tended to get their water either early in the morning, or late, late in the day in order to avoid the unbearable heat. The fact that this woman has come to the well in the middle of the day suggests that, for some reason, she wants to avoid people. She would rather put up with the uncomfortable mid-day heat than run the risk of running into someone from her town. Why this is the case we'll see in a moment....

And so, this woman approaches. And as she approaches, Jesus says "Give me a drink" which, to our southern ears, seems a bit blunt. But in that day and age, and given the cultural expectations that men, especially, single men, did not speak to women at all in public - given all those things his words would not likely have been received by this woman as rude or blunt - just surprising.

What's more, as the passage makes clear in verse 11, Jesus does not have anything to draw water with, presumably because his disciples would have taken it with them into the nearby town, in case they needed it along the way. So Jesus is not just trying to be shocking, nor is he just trying to initiate a conversation, he is most likely *really thirsty*, and yet uses this occasion and that fact to eventually turn the conversation in a much more substantial direction.

Now the woman, as we've already noted, is surprised at Jesus' request - partially because he is a man and she is a woman but more particularly because he is a *Jewish* man and she is a *Samaritan* woman. All the other Jews she knew would have nothing to do with her. They wouldn't even acknowledge her, much less speak to her or drink from the same container that she drank from.

And so the woman, in her response, draws Jesus' attention to this fact but Jesus is not at all affected by it and immediately comes back with, "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."

So, we see here that in response to her racial comment Jesus tells this woman that if she had any idea who she was talking to, *she* would be the one asking *him* for something. And in saying this, Jesus is inviting her to look past the historic rivalry between her people and the Jews, and to look past the fact of Jesus' Jewishness to the *person* that he is. He is inviting her to consider the fact that there is more going on here than meets the eye. There is more here than her preconceived ideas will allow her to see at the moment.

Now the woman clearly is not really grasping what Jesus is talking about here - but she IS intrigued. And to fully see this you have to understand something about the language Jesus uses here when he talks to her about "living water". The words used here are words which were used to describe "fresh water" or "running water" - like water from a river or spring. That was "living water" as opposed to other water that does *not* come from a moving stream or spring - like water from a pond, or water from a well.

And so, as the passage shows later on, while Jesus clearly has a double meaning behind the words "living water", the woman at this stage is taking Jesus' words in a very concrete fashion. She thinks he is talking about fresh, running water - all of which puzzles her. It puzzles her because she doesn't see any running water or spring nearby and so is not sure what he could be referring to. All she can see is a well - a deep well. That's the only water she knows of and to get *that* water, you need a bucket and Jesus doesn't even have *that!*

So, whoever this guy is, the woman at this point must have been thinking that perhaps he wasn't quite *all there* or, at the very least, he was a man who perhaps was suffering from some delusions of grandeur, making outrageous claims that he couldn't possibly back up. And so she challenges Jesus to do what, to her, seemed incredible and says, somewhat sarcastically, I believe, "Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us this well and drank from it himself..." - as if to say, "I don't know who you think you *are* talking this way, but this well once belonged to Jacob himself. He used it, his family used it, his livestock used it. If it was good enough for him, it's good enough for me. Whatever water you might have, I don't think you're going to beat that."

Now Jesus, of course, is not at all moved by this and so goes a step further with this woman, pointing out how and why the water HE is talking about is superior to the water SHE is talking about. Referring to the water in Jacob's well he says, "Everyone who drinks of *this* water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of *the water that I will give him* will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life..."

To this the woman responds, still only thinking in very literal terms, but she responds nonetheless - clearly intrigued by the idea of never being thirsty again and never having to draw water again from a well. Now, because she was still taking Jesus in a purely literal fashion, one wonders what she made of Jesus' words here about eternal life. And we simply don't know the answer to that. But whatever she thought about it, she was not deterred from asking Jesus for this water he was speaking of. Either he had it, or he didn't. And if he didn't then she is basically calling his bluff.

But then the conversation takes an abrupt turn. Jesus has pulled her in, gotten her attention, gotten her leaning forward - and then when she finally responds he changes the subject. He asks her to go and call her husband - to which she response that she *has* no husband - no doubt hoping that Jesus will leave things right there and move on.

But Jesus never does what you want him to do. Jesus had something else in mind. He knew what was going on with this woman. He knew her story. He knew that her answer, while technically correct, was also an attempt to hide from him her true situation.

But Jesus will have none of that and so shows her that she cannot hide the truth from him. He knows about the five other husbands. He knows that she is now living with a sixth man, who is not her husband. And so in the blink of an eye this woman is cornered, and no doubt dumbfounded, and can only respond by stating what suddenly seems obvious to her - that this is no ordinary man. There is something going on with him, there is some connection between this man and God. How else could he know what he know what He knows? He is, at the very least a prophet, and perhaps *the* prophet - the one that Moses spoke about in Deuteronomy 18 - indeed, the only prophet that the Samaritans DID believe in, and did think would eventually come. So, she has been exposed. The shame which drove her to get water in the midday heat has now been brought out into the open.

But the woman hasn't given up yet. There's no longer any hope of her hiding the truth from this man. But since he is a prophet, and knowledgeable about the things of God, perhaps she can get this prophet to go off on some tangent. Perhaps she can re-direct his attention away from her and her situation and onto some other, less personal, more theoretical discussion.

And so, she attempts to get him off point by raising the issue that, as we saw in the introduction - was a huge source of conflict between the Samaritans and the Jews - and that was the question of where was the proper place for the worship of God and the temple, and all those sorts of things.

But again, Jesus is not put off or taken in by this attempt at changing the subject. Instead he responds to her in very succinct, but effective manner, and then brings the conversation right back to more personal matters - to matters of the heart. And so, in response to her smoke screen about right and wrong places to worship, Jesus says:

1) It's really a pointless debate because the time is coming when the way that God's people worship will be radically changed and will have nothing to do with either Jerusalem OR Mt Gerizim or any other place for that matter

2) He points out that, in spite of what the woman and her fellow Samaritans might believe, salvation really *was* from the Jews - by which he meant that God's historical purposes *were* being worked out in and through the Jewish people and that it was through them, and not through any other race or lineage, that God's Messiah would actually, historically, personally appear. There was simply no denying that fact.

And in saying this, Jesus points out one of the deficiencies of the Samaritan's religious system - the fact that they had a very truncated Bible that consisted of only 5 books. That's what Jesus is referring to when he says, "You worship what you do not know". On the one hand, they did know *something* about the God of creation. They knew as much as they could know from the Books of Moses - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

On the other hand, there was so much more that they did NOT know about God and what He was doing because they had cut themselves off from God's revelation of himself contained in the historical books, and in the wisdom literature, and in the prophets. By rejecting those things, they had severely handicapped themselves and had rendered the little knowledge that they did have as woefully inadequate. And so Jesus says to them, "you worship what you do not know".

3) But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to further unpack what he has just said about worship not having anything to do with Jerusalem or Mt Gerizim. He explains that both now, and in the future, the mark of genuine worship will not be whether or not one is in the right place doing certain things. Instead, the mark of genuine worship will be worship that is done *in spirit and in truth*.

Now what does Jesus mean by this? Well, without going into a huge discussion of this, let me just summarize it this way: When Jesus talks about worship "in spirit" it seems to me that he simply *must* have in mind this reality that he has only recently spoken to Nicodemus about - i.e., that only those who are born of the Spirit can see the kingdom of God. Worship "in spirit", then is worship that is not merely mechanical or procedural or external but is worship that is done BY, and is an outworking OF that reality. It is worship that comes from a heart that has been transformed and indwelt and held captive by the Spirit of God.

When Jesus talks about worship being "in truth" he is simply saying that our worship needs to *correspond with reality*. It needs to be worship that recognizes God for who He truly IS and AS he has truly revealed himself - in His word and now most especially through His Son.

And so, in taking the focus in worship off of external things like places and temples and redirecting it back upon internal realities and the working of God's Spirit – by doing this, Jesus cuts through this woman's intended diversion and brings her back, relentlessly, to matters of the heart and to seeing and responding to God's revelation of himself.

And so, her diversion having failed, the woman makes one last attempt at bringing this whole conversation to a standstill by saying, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." In other words, she tries to at least bring the matter to a draw or a tie or just a stalemate by saying that, really, the only person who can ultimately settle these sorts of issues is the Messiah, and when he gets here, he'll sort all this out."

To which Jesus responds, "Guess what? He's here. That's me. I'm *him*."

Now there are a number of peripheral significances for God's people in this passage which we *might* focus on but, in the interest of time, we are only going to consider for a moment what I think is the *main* emphasis - and that is Jesus' offer of "living water" to this woman at the well.

Having said that, I will add very quickly that in thinking about the value of this passage for the *original* hearers and readers of this Gospel in John's day - it is certainly *true* that one of these "peripheral" emphases - that *we're* not going to touch on - was perhaps more significant for *them* in their situation than it might be in our own, and that has to do with this whole matter of whether or not there are special *places* for worship.

For the scattered Jews in and around the city of Ephesus, it would have been hugely helpful to be reminded of what Jesus says here about the importance of worship *in spirit and truth*, as opposed to worship in a certain place, involving certain procedures. Because John's readers were far, far away from both Jerusalem AND Mt Gerizim and had no hope of accessing either of these places apart from making some sort of long and possibly treacherous pilgrimage. And so, for them to be told that such places were not ultimately going to be of any value for worship would have been a great help.

But more importantly than that, it would have been infinitely more helpful for them - just as it is for us today - to hear Jesus' offer of "living water" to this woman - and to consider the significance of that for their lives.

So let's just think about that for a moment. When this woman set out that afternoon, heading for Jacob's well, *she wasn't looking for Jesus*. She didn't even know he was there. But - she WAS thirsty and so, when she arrives at the well, Jesus uses the fact of her physical thirst to address a deeper and more significant thirst - a thirst most clearly revealed by her repeated trips to the "relational well" of marriage - 5 times - and now launching into her sixth attempt to fill a gap, and to quench a thirst that Jesus knows will never be filled by any human relationship.

So, the woman wasn't looking for Jesus. But she *was* thirsty. She was dying of thirst.

Let me tell you something. There are people all around us who are not "looking for Jesus". Right? If you asked them they would not say those words. In fact, many would perhaps deny it strongly. But don't you be fooled by that for a moment. Because they ARE thirsty, and their life reveals that in numerous ways. And they may not, in their own words, be looking for "Jesus" - but I can guarantee you *they ARE looking for what only Jesus can give them.*

One writer puts it this way, and I am paraphrasing here, "Man suffers from a raging thirst. He cannot think of anything else. He is thirsty for love, for happiness, for security, for goodness, for fulfillment, for high purpose in his life. She is thirsty for acceptance. She is thirsty for the forgiveness of sins that weigh on her mind even when she will not admit it to herself. She is thirsty above all for eternity, for a life that does not end in either blackness or judgment. He is thirsty, in other words, for all that he was made for, made as he was in the image of God. He is thirsty for God and for the knowledge of God and for communion with God.

He doesn't know it; he never or rarely thinks in those terms. But that is what he or she is thirsty for. Men and women are always trying to slake that thirst. They draw from all the wrong wells and the salt water and the brackish water they bring up cannot slake their thirst, but they keep drawing up the bucket. People are greedy for what they know they do not yet have but what they cannot escape the desire for. They are thirsty. They live thirsty and, alas, multitudes die thirsty."

Isn't that right? Isn't that why we take drugs? Isn't that why we drink to excess? Of course it is. It is why we do all sorts of things. It is why we devote ourselves and addict ourselves to work, or to success, or to pleasure. It is why we run around like people possessed, racing from one activity to another, terrified by the thought that we or our children might miss out on something. It is why we turn the music up a little bit louder, and drive a little bit faster. It is why we stare out the window and wish we were somewhere else. We are thirsty for *life* - or at least for something that resembles it.

In short, the raging question for us is not just "Is there life after death?" - although that is a question that drive us. But what also drives us is the more pressing question, "*Is there life BEFORE death?*" Can this thirst I feel ever be quenched - in this life or the next?

Yes it can. That is what Jesus was saying tot his woman. That is what John's Gospel is saying to you. So, let's just bring this home. Let me give you just two quick applications to consider. Firstly, this story drives home the truth that there are people all around you who do not know Jesus and that all of these people - people in your family, people in your place of work, people in your neighborhood, people you play tennis with, people in your classes - there are people all around you who are *dying* of thirst, and whose lives show that in all sorts of ways. And these people, whether they know it or not, whether they would use these words or not - but all of these people are looking for what *only Jesus can give them.*

And if you care about these people at all, ask yourself this question, “What is the one question or the one statement that Jesus might ask this person, that would most directly reveal his thirst, that would most clearly show to her the repeated and failed attempts she has made at finding fulfilment at some other “well”? If Jesus were to confront my friend, or family member - what might he say?” Whatever those things are, whatever their thirst looks like, it may be that these realities provide you with an effective means of leading your friend or family member to quench their thirst at a well they have never ever considered - Jesus Christ.

Secondly, and finally, as Christians we simply must remember this: the thirst that *initially* drives us to Jesus, is the thirst that should *daily* drive us to Jesus, to continually be filled up by him, to be satisfied in him. We have to learn to believe - and we have to help one another believe - that no ONE and no THING can ever be for us what Jesus was meant to be - your wife cannot fill you up, your husband cannot complete you, nor your girlfriend or boyfriend, nor your children or grandchildren, not your job, not your successes, not your experiences, not your pleasures - none of these things will EVER slake your thirst, they will never satisfy you, they will never make you whole - they will never do for you what Jesus can and will do.

Go to him. The water is plentiful. The water is clear. And it will fill you to overflowing.