

**Exodus 17:1-7**  
**John 4:5-42**

**“Divination”**  
*First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL*  
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**Lent 3**

The Woman at the Well. Orthodox tradition gives her a name - Photina, and a day, February 26. If we were simply to moralize about this story of the Woman at the Well, we would miss the point John, the Gospel-writer, was trying to make. John never said anything about her being immoral or a sinner. We might extrapolate, from her being at the well at mid-day instead of morning, that she was ashamed to come when the other women did. Some scholars have tried to suggest other reasons for her 5 husbands (Levirate marriage – when a man dies, his brother had to marry the widow, etc.) But that probably strains credulity a bit. Still, this isn't what John wants you to know from this story. The point is, she was a Samaritan, and Jews (especially Rabbis) and Samaritans didn't even talk to each other.

There is some history behind that, and here is the short version. The Old Testament tells when Israel divided into two kingdoms, the Northern and the Southern. It wasn't like the Civil War, but more like the Czechs and the Slovaks deciding to call off the arrangement and make separate countries. 12 Tribes of Israel (from the sons of Jacob): The ten northern tribes were Israel, and the two dominant southern tribes were Judah. The northern tribes were conquered by the Assyrian Empire, who moved in people from 5 different vassal states as settlers (sort of like the British moving the Scots into Northern Ireland.) Later on, Judah was conquered by the Babylonian Empire, the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed, and the leaders all taken off into exile. At the end of the Babylonian captivity, when Cyrus the Persian liberated the Jews, Ezra and Nehemiah led them back to resettle Jerusalem and make a nation again. They tried to hook up with the northern tribes, but it didn't work. The Jewish people in Jerusalem had maintained the faith while they were captive, but thought the northerners had allowed the false gods of the Assyrian settlers to infiltrate religion, to the point where they decided the northerners were no longer Jews. As for those in the north, they didn't understand why the Jews said that you could only worship in Jerusalem – they had been worshipping at Shechem, actually an older shrine, for a long time and it seemed to work fine.

By Jesus' time, some 500 years later, the hostility remained and grown entrenched. So the woman at the well is startled that a Jewish man would speak to her; more than that, ask her for something, a drink. Jesus broke all the taboos, talking theology with a Samaritan, a woman with no chaperone, one ostracized by her community. But for John she is representative of all Samaritans. They were neither fish nor fowl, sort of a “third race.” While they considered themselves descended from Jacob, Jews did not consider them Jews, and Gentiles did not consider them non-Jews.

You need that background so we can ask what John wants us to know from this story. John's Gospel is carefully crafted – not a word is wasted; everything is there for a reason. Jesus talked to a Samaritan at Jacob's well. Remember Jacob wrestled with the angel and was re-named Israel, and his children became the heads of the tribes of Israel. Notice this is around water, and she was there with her water jar to draw water. It was around Noon, the 6<sup>th</sup> hour. The same hour where later, in John 19:14, we read: ‘Now it was the day of

Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” He made the same request of her that he would make from the Cross in John 19- “I am thirsty.” Everything John writes ties together in his Gospel where he wishes to persuade us that *this is indeed the Savior of the world.*

This episode follows the Nicodemus story where the Jewish teacher comes to him, now comes this representative Samaritan, and Gentiles will as well. The point is that a religiously ostracized group came to believe in Jesus. As early as the writing of this Gospel, the early church was trying to bridge religious divisions. Jesus is the savior of the world. All those different people.

Even the piece that distracts readers to a red herring, the 5 husbands of the woman, is symbolic as well. Those 5 are the false gods of the Assyrian settlers. It is less a story about her sex life than about her worship life,” husband” being a not-uncommon Biblical metaphor for God. (Well, not at my house, but in the Old Testament.) And water, “Living Water”, of course, is the greatest metaphor in the story.

Living water means, literally, running water or a spring, not usually well water. Jesus promised her living water so she would never be thirsty again. The living water from a greater “well of Jacob” is Jesus himself. She said, “Give me this water so I don’t have to come back here again.” He told her about her 5 husbands, and she started to realize who she was talking with. Recognizing him for a prophet, she brought up the argument about whether to worship at Shechem or Jerusalem, and he said, “This mountain or Jerusalem don’t matter, but worshiping in spirit and in truth does matter.” She said, “I know the Messiah is coming.” And Jesus said, “I am he,” and she mostly believed it. She left her water jar and ran to tell others, “Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done! Could he be the Messiah?”

The disciples returned from feeding their faces in town, bringing exactly “0” people to Jesus. The Samaritan woman told her experience and invited others to look and see – “Is God among us or not?” She did not even know how thirsty she was, until she met Jesus. Then, said Gerald Sloyan, “Nothing is forgotten but all is forgiven.”<sup>1</sup>

She came to faith not because he stunned her and made her feel even smaller; but rather in the middle of an encounter where Jesus, a foreigner, came thirsty to the well and asked her for help. Where others rejected her, Jesus respected her – with serious conversation and the power to give him a cup of water.

A couple of years ago I was with a mission group visiting Presbyterians in Perú. At the end of our time they gave us a great compliment, saying: “Others come full of advice and tell us what we should do. You came with empty hands and an open mind. Thank you.” Maybe we should more often go thirsty to others, let them pour the water.

For all those people who have not felt like the Chosen Ones, this woman kept the question alive: Is God among us? Could this be the Messiah?

There at the well, doing an ordinary chore, on what may have seemed an ordinary day, everything changed. People we thought we had pegged do something totally different than we expected, things we never expected to happen do happen, and when Jesus is in the equation you don't know what may happen.

Divination, I called this sermon. Interesting word. It comes from the Latin *divinare*, or “to be inspired by God.” It is often used as a synonym for dousing, or water witching – where the diviner, could we say God-seeker, takes a forked stick and walks the ground searching for water. The theory is that when the stick dips there is water under there.

In the Old Testament passage from Exodus, the problem is that there *is* no well, no water. Moses led the people on an Exodus from Egypt, and camped at Rephidim they were out of water. Dying of thirst, literally. They were not complaining over nothing when they said to Moses, “Give us water to drink.” He was the expedition's leader; that was his job. They blamed him, and he turned to God in prayer and blamed them for whining. But they had a reasonable complaint – if the Lord is with us, why is there no water? Why are we thirsty?

God sent Moses to a rock at Horeb, telling him to take that good stick – the one he parted the sea with (what my friend Houston Hodges called the “Practiced Stick”) and hit a rock with it. Divination. Sure enough, water came out of it.

Still, that is a question humankind has asked – if the Lord is with us, why did my loved one die? If the Lord is among us, why is my life a mess, why are things so hard? If the Lord is here, why don't I feel it? At some level we search for the water of life, the living water. And it is too easy to use “preacher-talk” to tell you just to have more faith in Jesus and all will be well. I don't know that it will be.

And yet I think the Lord *is* among us. Tom Evans preached a sermon at Presbytery where he quoted Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

And truly, I reiterate, . . . nothing's small!  
No lily-muffled hum of a summer-bee,  
But finds some coupling with the spinning stars;  
No pebble at your foot, but proves a sphere;  
No chaffinch, but implies the cherubim:  
And,—glancing on my own thin, veined wrist,—  
In such a little tremour of the blood  
The whole strong clamour of a vehement soul  
Doth utter itself distinct. Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries,  
And daub their natural faces unaware  
More and more, from the first similitude. <sup>2</sup>

We don't always have the eyes to see, the ears to hear. Maybe sometimes the calendar and the appointment book roar so loud we couldn't hear a still, small voice if it spoke directly in our ear. Maybe sometimes we are too full of ourselves to let someone else pour us a cup of living water. Perhaps we work so hard at finding meaning, or proving our worth that we can't accept grace because it is freely given. Perhaps we know ourselves to be Samaritans, neither fish nor fowl, with little clarity of identity or purpose, and too little sense of worth.

If the Lord is with us, why are we thirsty? Because we need more practice at spiritual divination, to find where the living water is? Because we need someone or something to shake us from our habits? Or because we didn't stop at the well long enough to look and to listen? Or because the living water is already within us, and we only had to be asked?

The woman (I'll call her Photina) at the well went back into the city and left her water jar. She didn't need it any more. She *was* the water jar.

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<sup>1</sup> Sloyan, Gerald John, *Interpretation*, 1988, John Knox Press, Louisville

<sup>2</sup> Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, Aurora Leigh, *Bk VII, 1*, 812-826, 1857