

Thirst

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Scripture

John 4:5-42

So he 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, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "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!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that 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."

Sermon

Every day was the same. A trip to the well with an empty water jar and home again, now heavy. She went alone, usually around noon, the hottest hour. It was probably the safest time to go. Fewer people around. They all knew who she was. The city of Sychar wasn't that big. They knew who she was. And she knew the looks. She knew about the gossip. People can be cruel. She knew shame. You can see why it was probably safer to go at noon; she wouldn't have to meet anyone. She could just get to the well, fill her water jar, and then head home—if that's what you want to call it. It wasn't much of a home life. It certainly wasn't conventional. She was married once—then again, and again, and again, and again. The man she was returning home to that day wasn't her husband.

Every day going to the same well, to Jacob's well with an empty jar. Relentlessly going to the same old well, with an empty jar. Empty. Tired and empty.

One day, like every other, she went to the well with her empty jar, and he was waiting for her. He was exhausted, tired from his journey. He didn't have to travel through Samaria to get home to the Galilee; all we're told is that he *"had to travel through Samaria"* (Jn. 4:4). Maybe so, but he didn't have to stop there. That was his choice. [1] He was sitting on the edge of the well in the heat of the day. A strange man at the well. She approached with caution. She could tell he was a Jew, which added to her concern. She knew how Jews viewed people like her. Samaritans, they felt, were unclean, subhuman. She was a Samaritan woman with a complicated past.

He was alone. His friends went to buy food. He stayed there to rest. But he was thirsty. "Give me a drink" (John 4:7), he says. Not even "Please." Not very polite. She was probably used to people talking that way to her, but not Jews. Jews didn't talk to Samaritans and certainly not to Samaritan women in public. Jesus had to be direct and to the point. She was suspicious. Was it a trick? "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan?" (Jn 4:9). A Jew was not allowed to touch something that a Samaritan had handled; they could not share anything.

Jesus cryptically replies, "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 [for a drink] and he would have given you living water" (Jn 4:10). If you knew what I could give, you would be asking me for water.

Confused, she says, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" (Jn 4:11). Jacob's Well was deep, about 100 feet deep, fed by a fresh spring. He had no way to retrieve water from that well on his own, no bucket, nothing, nothing "clean" for a Jew to use, that is. She became defensive, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" (Jn 4:12).

Then Jesus says, without responding to her question, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (Jn 4:13-14).

Never thirsty again. "Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (Jn 4:13). Never again, she says to herself, will I have to come to this blasted well, lugging away a heavy jar of water. Never again will I have to subject myself to the shame and humiliation of coming to this well.

Then, from out of nowhere, Jesus said, "Go, call your husband, and come back" (Jn 4:16). "I have no husband," she said. "You're right, you don't. The one you do have is certainly not your husband." How did he know such things about her? Who is this person? Was he a prophet?

Now the conversation deepens. She begins to like him but wonders why his people dismiss her. "Where we worship on Mt. Gerizim is not good enough for you, because it's not Jerusalem?" (Jn. 4:20). And then she really becomes confused when he says, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountaintop nor in Jerusalem... the hour is coming, and now is here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:21-24). She knows he's talking about a future time. The Samaritans, too, are waiting for the coming of the Messiah. "When he

comes," she says, "he will proclaim all things to us" (Jn 4:25); he'll settle our differences, he will tell us what is true. And then, Jesus says, directly, "*I am he*, the one who is speaking to you" (Jn 4:26).

"Just then," his disciples return with the food, shocked to see him talking to her. No one dared to question him, though. Then, leaving the water jar behind, she slipped away from the men and ran off into the city, proclaiming, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (Jn 4:29). Can he?

That day the endless, monotonous daily routine came to a surprising end. She didn't return immediately home. Instead, she ran into the city without a desire to be isolated or cut off from the community; she didn't care what people thought of her—she had become an evangelist. She didn't return home with a jug of water; instead, as the text clearly says, *she left the clay jar back at the well*. We need to pay attention to every detail in John's Gospel. She ran into the city to tell others what she discovered about this man—and about herself.

Wouldn't you love to know her name? Sadly, we're never told. This nameless Samaritan woman is the first person in John's Gospel to announce that the Messiah has come. She was later given the name St. Photine of Samaria. Photine means "enlightened one." That works.

But what if we imagined other names for her? What might we choose? How about *Desire*? Not Desiree, which means "to be desired." *Desire*. An odd name, perhaps. It was a favorite name for the Puritans. Desire reflects her deep—deeper than Jacob's Well—yearning for something more. When she heard that there was another water source besides this well, she immediately said, "Sir, give me this water..." That's a desire for something more to orient her life. It says something about the state of her life on that day. She goes to the well to satisfy her thirst. *But all the water in the world won't slake the deeper thirst of her soul that cries out for something more, a life beyond the shame, humiliation, and judgment*. Jesus knows her; he knows what she needs. In order for her to see and then receive what he has to offer, he has to take her out of one frame of mind and bring her into another. That's what his cryptic responses are doing, I think. They're very mysterious. We never really know what's going on. They seem to be talking past each other. Jesus throws her into confusion. One statement from Jesus yields a question from Desire and then another response from Jesus. Jesus is helping her say what she really wants, what she truly desires. He's drawing the truth out from her; he wants her to name what she's genuinely thirsting for in life. Jesus is intentionally stirring the water, as it were.

So, *Desire* works, but perhaps a better name might be *zōē*. Why *zōē*? In Greek, there are two words that can be translated as "life." There's *bios* (from which we get "biology" and "biography"). *Bios* is natural life. Ordinary life. It's functional life, existing but not really living.

The Greek word for *really* living is *zōē* (ζωή). *Zōē* refers to vitality, that which animates and calls one to life. *Zōē* is abundant life, full life, a life overflowing with meaning, purpose, love, and light. It's "authentic existence." [2] It's vigorous life. It's life that yields more life, not just sustains it, like *bios*. *Zōē* is one of John's favorite words; he uses it thirty-two times in the Gospel. We find it in the opening verses of the Gospel where John describes Jesus this way: "What has come into being in him was life (*zōē*), and the *zōē* was the light of all people" (John 1:4). When Jesus says that he's "the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)," the Greek reads *zōē*. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have *zōē* and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). When Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life," he's talking about *zōē*, not *bios*. "I am the resurrection and the *zōē*" (Jn. 11:25). When Jesus says he can offer the Samaritan woman "living water," it's *zōē* behind that word. It's overflowing life that cannot be contained in ordinary life. "The water that I will give," Jesus said, "will become in them a spring of water

gushing up to eternal life." In them—in us—within the heart or soul or psyche, within our lives this new life will flow. And when Jesus talks about "eternal life," he's not talking about life in heaven, but life, here and now. [3] Jesus is talking about true life, *zōē* life, touched by the divine, by eternity. That is God's life, God's *zōē* welling up within us, gushing up within us. Later in John's Gospel, we find Jesus saying, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37).

That's the kind of life, with a capital "L," that Jesus came to offer, came to give, the kind of life Jesus still offers and gives. It's so easy for us to get caught up in our routine lives and forget that Jesus is trying to give us something more. The woman at the well is so stuck in a day-to-day routine, despairing, that it's difficult for her to imagine a different way, an alternate life, something more. The poet T.S. Eliot (1888-1964) once asked, "Where is the Life we have lost in our living?" [4] It's a question that often haunts me. I believe that this is what Jesus came to offer her—*Life*—and he will not relent until the scales over her eyes are washed away and she's allowed to see him and herself. He offers her something more: greater life, truer life, meaningful life, God's life. That's what Jesus is always extending to you and me. Always more Life. Always.

And yet, there's something that causes us to forget this truth or refuse this truth; maybe we're afraid to really trust it. I agree with Christian Wiman who suggest why this is so; he pinpoints a fundamental problem in us. He says we're always trying to bring God down to our level. Wiman is one of the leading intellectuals of our age; he was the former editor of the esteemed journal *Poetry*. He was raised a Christian, grew up in the church, moved away from it, then came back just around the time he fell in love, got married, and was diagnosed with a very rare form of cancer. He has written extensively about his experience and the depth of his faith. In his stunningly beautiful memoir *My Bright Abyss*, Wiman says, "Our minds are constantly trying to bring God down to our level rather than letting him lift us into levels of which we were not previously capable. This is as true in life as it is in art." When I read this, I think of the Samaritan woman at the well, St. Photine, Desire, or Zoe. She's stuck at one level and can't quite connect with what Jesus is saying. Her literal mindedness prevents her from receiving the truth. At first, she responds to Jesus from within her immediate frame of reference. It's all she can do. Wiman says, "Thus we love within the lines that experience has drawn for us, we create out of impulses that are familiar and, if we were honest with ourselves, exhausted." [5] We stay within the confines of the familiar, we allow our past to limit what the future can be, we stay close to home, keep up the tired routines, stay in our ruts, and we end up exhausted because we're trying to keep things as they are, trying to bring God down into our world, into our lives, trying to fit God into our experience, our expectations.

But Wiman wonders, "*What might it mean to be drawn into meanings that, in some profound and necessary sense, shatter us? This is what it means to love,*" he says. [6] That's what love does. Love shatters old ways—ways that do not, can no longer give us life—to open us up to a "still more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31), which is precisely what Jesus offered the woman at the well. It's all given in deep, profound love. "Unceasing love," as the choir sang several weeks ago, "surpassing all we know." [7]

And so, she discovered something new flowing within her soul, a new life stirring, bubbling, gushing up within her. Fully known by Jesus, she has nothing to hide. And she is seen, recognized, and understood by him. He knows her through and through; he knows her past—all of it. And yet—did you notice?—without a word of judgment, he lifts her up and calls her forward into a new way of life. And so, she leaves the water jar behind. That clay jar and all it represents for her no longer "contains" her life. A tired, worn symbol of her life, she didn't

need it anymore. In leaving the jar behind, she's also leaving the rest of her life behind. Love calls her forward. Her body, her heart, her soul, together, now become the container for a new life, living water, the *zōē*-life of God gushing forth within her, and she, is born again.

I like to think that when she left that jar behind, she went in haste to share the good news. She tossed it away, and when it landed on the ground, it cracked. Or, maybe, better, she tossed it away, and when it landed on the ground, it—*shattered*.



Sources

- [1] Jaime Clark-Soles, *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2016), 36.
- [2] John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1955), 135ff.
- [3] Macquarrie, 138: "Such life, understood not as a natural phenomenon but as man's authentic God-given existence, is eternal or everlasting life, because, being the opposite of death, the concomitant of sin, it is therefore immune from death. Thus the believer has even now eternal life." See also John 3:16, 5:24, 6:47, 17:3.
- [4] T.S. Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock"* (1934).
- [5] Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 49-50.
- [6] Wiman, 50.
- [7] From the choral piece *Pilgrim's Hymn* by Stephen Paulus (1949-2014), with text by poet Michael Dennis Browne. [youtube.com/watch?v=WhcnxL0xRhc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhcnxL0xRhc)