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John 4: 1-42

## AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

What's the best drink of water that you've ever had? (Leave your comments in the chat.)

Jesus was thirsty!

He's left Judea to return to Galilee. But the GPS routed him through Samaria. It was the most direct route, but most Jews would have found another way.

It wasn't friendly territory for the Jewish people, no "Welcome to Samaria" signs for them. There was an historical animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews of Jerusalem. They disagreed on just about everything, where to worship, how to interpret the Torah, ways to honor God.

The Samaritans considered their origins to be in the kingdom of Israel and they were correct about that. But when Israel became divided after King Solomon's reign, Judeans considered the Samaritan pedigree to have blemished because there was intermarriage between the Samaritans and the Assyrians, the empire that conquered and occupied Samaria.

In the eyes of the Judean Jews this land and these people were unclean and impure.

Now you would have thought that Jesus would have picked up the pace and gotten through this leg of the trip as quickly as possible.

But he was thirsty, really thirsty, and he knew there was a well near the city of Sychar known as Jacob's well which Jacob had given to his son, Joseph.

He finds the well, but Jesus has no bucket to draw water, and it is hot, high noon, and did I mention that Jesus was thirsty?

A Samaritan woman comes to the well with her bucket to draw water.

Now, it would have been ludicrous to imagine that a Jew would ever speak to a Samaritan. But even more preposterous that a Jewish man would speak to a Samaritan woman. Unimaginable!

Unless you're really thirsty and she has a bucket and you don't.

Jesus says, "Give me a drink!" It might be the best drink of water he would ever have.

But his request is unbelievable to the woman. There must be some terrible mistake that he would talk with her and then be willing to drink the water from her bucket.

It's at this point where we move quickly in the text to Jesus' conversation with the woman about 'living water.' He speaks of living water that he can give to her, but she's confused. The well is deep, and he has no bucket.

I am not ready or willing to leave so suddenly the reality of Jesus's physical thirst and move to the theological concept of "living water."

The giver of the living water is thirsty, physically and needs a drink.

Jesus knows what it means to be thirsty. Later in John's Gospel we hear as one of his last words on the cross, "I thirst!"

Jesus speaks to the woman from a place of vulnerability. He needs something that at that moment only she can give him.

I haven't counted the number of spickets in this church building, but I suspect that there are several places I could go, confident that when I turn on the spicket and put my glass underneath, I am not going to have any problem getting a glass of water.

But that's not the situation for everyone. World Water Day is celebrated in March each year, and I don't plan to go into all the statistics, but there are so many places in the world where people must walk to a water supply that is often contaminated, the water then has to be boiled and filtered before any thirst can be quenched.

In reading Kristen Hannah's book, "The Four Winds" we are reminded of the Dust Bowl in this country in the 1930s which intensified the Great Depression causing those in the southern plains region to have to leave their farms and migrate to other places; places where they were often treated like annoying refugees, housed in camps where water, food and jobs were scarce. Going to contaminated water sources, boiling and filtering water so that they could have a little bit to drink was just a part of their daily routine.

There are so many places in the world where people rely on others for their water... just as Jesus relied on this woman to quench his thirst.

He knew the physical need had to be tended to first, and she could help with that.

But she also begins to understand that he has something to give her as well, something he calls living water.

She begins to see him as a visible manifestation of something deeper. She doesn't quite get it, but it makes her realize that in a different way, she is thirsty also.

"Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Of course, she will have to continue drawing water to drink, to wash, to cook.

But she's beginning to get an inkling of a different kind of water; God's purifying, ever flowing water which can quench thirsty hearts, satisfy parched souls, and heal lives of drought.

The dialog continues with Jesus telling her everything she has ever done.

Many traditions have judged this woman's background. Five husbands! Yikes! She must be a floozy.

But this text has no mention of sin, judgment, or forgiveness or the woman's shame at what Jesus said. Maybe she was bound by a Levirate marriage in which a brother dies, and another brother marries the wife, and that brother dies and another brother marries the wife. It was not unheard of for a man to refuse to marry the wife upon his brother's death, and a woman could be left with no husband. We are not told her circumstances

What matters is that she is feeling **seen by Jesus** in a society that did not regard women especially those who had no husband. She felt **known** by Jesus.

Still, the conversation continues. The Rev Debie Thomas notes in her essay on "The Woman At The Well" that Barbara Brown Taylor points out that Jesus' dialogue with the woman at the well is the longest recorded conversation in the New Testament. He talks with her longer than he talks with his disciples, his family members, even his accusers.

They speak of worship! Do they ever! The word "worship" is mentioned nine times in five verses, and she starts to ponder the coming of the Messiah. In fact, she's the one who boldly brings it up.

And confident in her understanding, according to John's Gospel, this is the first person to whom Jesus says, "I am he (the Messiah), the one speaking to you. Would it have been in anyone's wildest imagination that the first person Jesus would reveal himself to would be a woman, a Samaritan woman?

Maybe this is Jesus' moment of realization that the scope of his mission is going to be a lot more universal than he thought.

The beauty of this whole scene is that the woman stuck with Jesus and Jesus stuck with her. They didn't always understand one another, but no one got up and walked away or made excuses about needing to get home or back on a travel schedule. They stayed.

And they would have continued talking except that the disciples interrupted, bringing back food for themselves and Jesus. They couldn't believe their eyes. They were horror struck, astonished that Jesus would be speaking with this woman.

But she doesn't have time for those narrow minds as she is so excited to go into the city to share this encounter. The Rev. Debie Thomas writes that even as this newfound faith is young and forming, still in process (He cannot be the Messiah, can he?), even her questions become part of her evangelism, her own curiosity a tool that arouses the curiosity of the other Samaritans.

And the living water is exactly what is now flowing out of her. It didn't flow with eloquent words, arm twisting, persuasion or discrediting of anyone's beliefs. It flowed because she told of her experience with this very unexpected encounter.

Later in John, Jesus says, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

We are both the recipient of living water as well as the conduit, the vessel from which it flows into the world.

The woman did not feel it was her calling to convince her fellow Samaritans of the truth of Jesus. Her calling was to help them hear Jesus for themselves. And they did.

We can help people hear Jesus by sharing how we experience Jesus. It doesn't take fancy language or long-drawn-out emotional testimony that uses more words than heart. It's imparting our experience, walking through the doors of opportunity to share Jesus that others might come to hear for themselves.

But don't forget that the passage begins with Jesus being thirsty. There was a thirst to be quenched that needed attention.

So, we can also help people hear Jesus by giving them a drink of water, by being by their side in times of grief, by securing someone's next meal, by offering warm clothes when we know it's going to be 14 degrees. I ran into a friend of Christ Our Anchor's this week as she was making her way to the front of a checkout line with huge, puffy winter coats that she discovered were a good price, so she cleared the rack and bought them all. I looked at her, and she said, "For whoever needs them." What a wonderful way to help someone hear Jesus!

Are you a conduit for God's living water?

What flows out of you?

Think about that this week.

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So, the woman went into town and left her bucket at the well.

Now, most commentaries conclude very neatly that her leaving her bucket means that she left her old life behind. It seems like a very reasonable understanding of the text.

But maybe (and I am only speculating, it's not in the text), but maybe she left the bucket on purpose knowing that those disciples, appalled at the sight of Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman, would start eating their food, and at some point say, "We're thirsty. Does anyone have any water?"

"Sure," says Jesus with a grin. "Look, someone left a bucket. Let me draw us some water."

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In addition to being the living conduit through which God's water can flow, we must also remember to receive the living, constant flowing water, and be prepared for that water to flow into us in the most unexpected places, through the most surprising voices, from those who buckets of water we would never think of sharing.

It might be the best drink of water we will ever have.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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