"The Woman From Samaria Encounters Jesus"
John 4:1-30, 39-41
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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Last Sunday in our study of the Gospel of John we focused on chapter 3, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Remember Jesus talked about the impotence of being born from above - and how Nicodemus heard this literally as a call to be born again, to enter his mother's womb a second time. Though Jesus tried to explain the need for spiritual rebirth to him, Nicodemus seemed not to get it. His last words were, "How can these things be?" Jesus went on to share the amazing good news that out of love for the whole world, God gave Jesus so that all who believe may have eternal life. And this eternal, abundant life is not just for when we die and go to heaven - no, it is abundant life that can begin right here, right now.

So this week we turn to chapter 4, and we have another conversation partner with Jesus, this time a woman from Samaria that Jesus meets at the well. Let us listen now for God's Word:

John 4.1-30, 39-41

> Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. 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.
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> 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."
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> "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?"
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> "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."
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> "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Then Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."
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> "I have no husband."

"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!"

"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."

"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."

"I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

"I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,

"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Who do you spend your time talking to? Who are your conversational partners? In an age of texting and social media and other digital forms of communications, I think we have lost the art of conversation. I remember my mom spending hours on the phone talking to her brothers and her close friends. When I was a teenager, I remember taking the home phone and stretching the cord as far as it could go to have some privacy when I wanted to talk to someone special. I remember using a calling card in college to call home on Sunday nights, checking in with my mom and letting her know what was happening in my world. ***Whom we spend time with, who we choose to be our conversational partners, these decisions say a lot about what we value and who we value, too.***

Out of all the recorded conversations Jesus had in the Bible, the one we just read today is perhaps the most significant one of all. If you are a thinking person and are paying attention, you may be wondering, "How can you say that?" Well, for one thing it is by far the longest conversation Jesus has in the gospels, and it contains rich theological and historical themes. In John's gospel this is the first time Jesus directly reveals his identity as the Messiah, the Christ - God in the flesh. And this is the first time we see someone become a witness to not only a few people but to a whole village! The good news of God's abundant love for the whole world, the good news we heard Jesus talk about in

chapter 3 with Nicodemus - this good news comes to life through this conversation with Jesus and this woman at Jacob's well.

Bible scholars have pointed out the contrasts we see between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman (Karoline Lewis, John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries, p. 45). Nicodemus is a man with a given name - the character in today's story is a woman whose name is not given. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of night - this woman encounters Jesus at high noon, the time the sun would be the brightest. Nicodemus is a leader of the Jews, a well respected Pharisee - the woman in today's story is a Samaritan, an ethnic group despised by the Jews for their different religious beliefs. And Samaritans had no love for Jews either. Though they shared a common ancestor in Jacob, they worshiped in different places and the animosity ran deep. Think of the Hatfields and the McCoys, or the racial tensions between blacks and whites during the segregated south.

All of this background should help us to appreciate the shocking way this scene opens! Jesus does what no Jewish person in their right mind would do - on his way from Jerusalem to Galilee he decides to take the route through Samaria. And because he's thirsty, he decides to go to Jacob's well for a drink. But he's out of luck - he has no bucket. And when his disciples go out to get some food, low and behold a Samaritan woman shows up. And again he does what no Jew would ever do alone - he talks with the woman. "Give me a drink," he says (4.7). And the Samaritan woman replies, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (4.9) She knows that Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans, and yet this is another boundary Jesus is willing to cross. Though we might think Jesus is only motivated by his thirst, as the conversation develops we see that something more is going on. Jesus begins to talk about living water, the type of spiritual water that when you drink of it, you will never be thirsty again. "The water that I give you will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." It's the type of water that we heard the Joyful Choir sing about today - it's the river of peace and joy, the ocean of love - the waters that come from the Spirit of God flowing inside of us as a gift.

But here's the funny thing - like Nicodemus did in his conversation in chapter 3, the woman at first takes Jesus literally. "Sir, give me this magical water so I don't have to keep coming here to draw water from this well!" But as the story unfolds, we see that unlike Nicodemus she finally gets it - she is able to embrace the truth that Jesus speaks not on the literal level but on a spiritual one. She is able to embrace the truth that Jesus offers spiritual water that gushes up to eternal life. How does this happen?

Well, as the story unfolds it takes an unusual turn. Almost out of nowhere Jesus tells the woman to go get her husband and then come back to the well. And the woman answers Jesus honestly that she doesn't have a husband. "That's right!" Jesus says. "You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" Over the last several centuries of interpreting this text many have jumped to the conclusion that the woman must be a sinner. "She's been married so many times and now is living with someone who is not her husband, what kinda woman is this?!" However, I think this conclusion is both wrong and unfortunate. Bible scholar Karoline Lewis points out that by being married 5 times and still being without a husband highlights how vulnerable of a position she is in. You see, being married five times in ancient Palestine "would be evidence of circumstances completely beyond the control of any woman at that time" as women were not allowed to initiate a divorce (Lewis, p. 60). It's possible she's been married multiple times because her husbands have died, or that she is barren, a woman unable to bear children, or that her husbands found her unlovely for other reasons and so they exercised their male privilege and

divorced her. In the book of Deuteronomy (25.5-10) there's a law designed to protect widows - it says the brother of a dead husband is required to take in his dead brother's wife, either by marriage or by living arrangements of some kind (Lewis, p. 60). This explains why this woman would be living with a man who is not her husband. Many would assume that somehow she is cursed by being a woman with no children and no husband. And maybe this shame is why she comes to the well at the hottest time of the day, so that she won't see anyone and be ostracized.

Notice that nowhere in this conversation does Jesus call her a sinner or implies that she must repent of anything. Instead, Jesus shows that he knows her inside and out- he knows her whole life, including her vulnerability and the shame that would no doubt go with her status. And here is what is so remarkable - it is to this nameless woman that Jesus chooses to reveal his full identity - he is God's Messiah and the presence of God the great "I am" resides in him. As she begins to discern his identity, first as a prophet then as the Messiah, we see rivers of life flowing through her! In her joy she drops her bucket and runs to her village to tell the people of the good news. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (4.29) She no longer holds on to her old bucket that gave her water that needed to be filled time and time again. No, she has gotten a taste of the living water, the kind that will quench our deepest thirst. You see, this nameless Samaritan woman becomes the first person to witness to the Messiah, and through her witness many other Samaritans come to believe. The story ends with Jesus staying in the Samaritan village for two full days, and the people there coming to know the truth that Jesus is indeed the Savior of the world.

The Gospel of John is full of symbols and signs that point beyond themselves to deeper truths. We saw that in the miracle at the wedding in Cana, Jesus turning water into wine. And we see that in today's story of the woman at the well, where we learn that living water is a free gift that will quench our deepest needs. It doesn't take a plumber to know that actual physical water always flows to the lowest spot. But did you know the same is true for living water, the water of the Spirit? (Working Preacher Narrative Podcast #480, January 30, 2022) The deep places in us which we hold onto, trying to keep secret - the shame over our failures and addictions, the pain of broken relationships, our grief over lost dreams and loved ones we have lost - my friends, the gospel of Jesus Christ is that living water cleanses and renews us in these deep places, bringing us life where we need it the most.

Maybe there are places in your life that need this kind of water. Maybe there are people in your life who have a deep thirst that only God's living water can quench. Remember that we belong to a God who not only knows our every need, but loves us with a never ending, unquenchable love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.