

Sermon 3-8-26
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W. Hempstead, NY
Based on the Gospel Lesson for The Third Sunday in Lent, John 4:1-42

At The Well

Three years ago when today's Gospel lesson last came up, I assembled an historical account from scripture that traced the origin of the Jewish - Samaritan animosity of Jesus' time. I'm not going to retrace it today. Let's just say that by the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans had had an unhappy 500 year history living right next to each other. Some things just don't change in the holy land.

The Samaritans were not pagans. They worshipped Yahweh. However, historical events had set the Samaritans on a different path. They had their own temple to Yahweh. Samaritans were refused entry into Yahweh's Jerusalem temple and they wouldn't have entered anyway. That's how intense the religious division was.

So let's dive into today's Gospel lesson. First a little background. In the second chapter of John's Gospel we read that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover that fell in that first year of His ministry. It was during this festival that Jesus drove out the money changers and those selling sacrificial animals for the first time. Matthew, Mark and Luke record that He did this a second time when He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday for the final Passover of His ministry.

We're told in John 2:23-25, "23 Now when he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."

With these words, John tells us of something that continually amazed him and the other apostles. Jesus had access to the thoughts and history of every person He interacted with. He even had access to what groups of people were thinking. This was and remains an important testimony that Jesus is God Almighty incarnate in mortal human flesh.

It was during that first Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread that Jesus had the night time interview with Nicodemus that we read about last week in chapter three of John's Gospel. Then, after Passover, Jesus remained in Judea with His disciples. They traveled to the Jordan River and there baptized many people. It was during this time that John the Baptist told his disciples that his influence would decrease because Jesus' influence had to increase.

So, we next read in John 4:1-3, "1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John 2 (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), 3 he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. 4 And he had to pass through Samaria."

There's something quite peculiar about this scenario. No observant Jew in his right mind would have traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee through the land of the hated Samaritans. Instead, Jews would take a long detour east from Jerusalem to Jericho then turn north along the Jordan River and finally into Galilee. Since Jesus and His disciples were

already at the Jordan baptizing people, it makes no sense that they had to pass through Samaria. Perhaps Jesus sensed that He was in some danger from the Pharisees of Jerusalem and disappeared into Samaria to lose them. That's just speculation.

But one thing is for sure. Jesus knew He had a divine appointment with the people of Samaria. As we saw above, the people of Samaria weren't hostile toward Yahweh. They worshipped and served Him. They just did so at a different temple and in a different way than the Jews. But they worshipped Yahweh and they were also expecting His Messiah, as we'll find out. Therefore, it was part of the plan for Jesus to go there.

Indeed, commentators point out that in his Gospel, John makes it clear that Jesus didn't receive much of a welcome in Jerusalem and Judea. Thus, He felt a need to leave. In contrast, John wants us to know that Jesus was received enthusiastically in Galilee and as we'll see, also in Samaria, of all places.

We read in John 4:5-6, "5 So he [Jesus] came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour."

There's a lot of Torah history here that was claimed by the Samaritans. Jacob's son, Joseph, was made second in command in Egypt. He rescued his eleven brothers, his father, and the rest of the family from the great seven years of famine that plagued Egypt and the land of Canaan.

The descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob became the twelve tribes of Israel. Each tribe bore the name of their ancestor. However, Joseph was not counted among the tribes. There was no tribe of Joseph. Instead, Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh were counted among the tribes. Now if, you're doing the math and you come up with thirteen tribes, you're correct. However, the descendants of Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben, are not counted among the tribes of Israel, because Reuben committed sin against his father, by having a sexual union with one of his father's concubines. Therefore, Jacob disinherited him. So, we're back to twelve.

When the tribes of Israel conquered the land of Canaan under Joshua, the two tribes of Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim, settled in northern Israel. Of the two tribes, Ephraim was the more numerous and powerful. So, Ephraim eventually became a name associated with northern Israel.

Most of the Israeli people in the north were forcibly deported when the Assyrian Empire conquered them in 721B.C. But then the empire forcibly imported people from various parts of the empire into northern Israel to replace the population. The Samaritans were the descendants of these imported peoples and the few Israelites who were left behind. Therefore, it was only natural that when the Samaritans adopted the worship of Yahweh they came to think of themselves as the replacement for the northern tribes. And this was their affinity for Joseph, the son of Jacob.

Now, it used to be a well kept secret of the rabbis that Jewish theologians from before Jesus' time calculated that there are two Messiah's: Messiah, son of Joseph (meaning Joseph, son of Jacob) and Messiah, son of David. But the news is now out in the open. I'm currently reading a scholarly work on the subject by David C. Mitchell.

Messiah, son of Joseph is also called Messiah Ephraim after Joseph's son, Ephraim. Now, being inheritors of the northern tribes that had rebelled against David's kingdom and being in an antagonistic relationship with the Jews of the tribe of Judah, it was only natural for the Samaritans to look forward to Messiah Ephraim rather than Messiah, son of David.

According to Mitchell, then, the Samaritan Messiah, was to be a king descended from Joseph, not David. He would set Samaria free and establish it as a power. The Samaritan Messiah would live a long life. But then He would die in the ordinary way of mortals at age 110.

So, after an arduous journey north from Judea, here was Jesus at noon resting at the well of Jacob on the land Jacob had given to his son, Joseph, centuries before. Jesus was by Himself because His disciples had gone into Sychar to buy lunch. But suddenly the divine appointment Jesus had come to Samaria for commenced. We read in John 4:7, "A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'"

Throughout the ancient Near-east, women were the water bearers. Early in the morning they went out to the well and brought water home for their families. So it was natural for the women of any community to have what we would call a water cooler moment at the well, socializing and sharing all the latest news and gossip. The fact that this woman came at noon instead of 6am tells us something. She was a social outcast. If she went out early in the morning all the gossip would be about her, and in an unfriendly way.

John 4:9-12, "9 The Samaritan woman said to him [Jesus], 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?' (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 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.' 11 The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.'"

So, three things come out of the initial stage of this conversation. First, is "living water." Just like the term "born again" that Jesus used with Nicodemus, "living water" is a parable. It has to be explained, both for the woman and for us. Second is the same hidden question Nicodemus had: "who are you?" It came out this way, "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" Third, is some Samaritan pride. You Jews think you're descendants of Jacob (whom God named Israel)? Well, we Samaritans also claim Jacob as our father. So there!

Jesus ignored her Samaritan pride and went straight to the questions of what living water is and who He is. John 4:13-15, "13 Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.' 15 The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.'"

Just like Nicodemus didn't get the parable of being born again, so the woman tripped over the parable of living water. Nicodemus got stuck wondering how a senior citizen could be born of his mother. As far as this lady is concerned, I don't know how she thought Jesus could give her indoor plumbing so she wouldn't have to come to the well, but that's what it sounds like. She entirely missed that Jesus equated living water with eternal life.

So, it was time to cut to the chase. John 4:16-18, "16 Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come here.' 17 The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.'"

A pesty video advertisement for an MGM Las Vegas hotel called Cosmopolitan has invaded my YouTube feed lately. The advertisement seems to be oriented to women looking for a girls night out. But it hints at more. Here's what it says. "Check into Mischief. Just the

right amount of wrong.” This is typical of the demonic debauchery propaganda being fed to females in our culture these days. It seems to me that if the lady from Sychar were alive today, she could have been a poster girl for that bad girl advertisement.

So, what do you do when someone you’ve never met before knows about and confronts you with all the secret sin in your life? Maybe be like a modern politician and deflect the conversation somewhere else? Let’s see how the bad girl from Sychar does. John 4:19, “The woman said to him [Jesus], ‘Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.’” She got that part right. So, she’s getting closer to who Jesus is. But then she jumps into politician mode with a deflection. John 4:20, “‘Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.’” This is one of the historic beefs that Samaritans had with Jews. Our temple to Yahweh here in Samaria is just as good as yours, but you Jews say it’s not.

John 4:21-24, “21 Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’”

It almost sounds like Jesus played politician Himself and sidestepped the issue the woman raised. He didn’t. For, instead of arguing the issue as it had stood for hundreds of years, Jesus told the woman that something new was coming that would solve the whole problem. Worship of Yahweh would no longer be confined to a temple building in a specific location. Indeed, both the Samaritan temple and the Jewish temple were destroyed long ago. Instead, Jesus declared that worship is going to come from the hearts of believers who can worship Yahweh in something He called “spirit and truth.” Jesus’ reply meant that Yahweh’s “footprint” on earth no longer would be in a building, but in the human hearts of believers. And Yahweh’s footprint would be placed in the heart by Messiah and Lord Holy Spirit. Indeed, our worship here has little to do with this building. It has everything to do with you and I and Jesus planted in our hearts by the Word and Lord Holy Spirit.

John 4:25-26, “25 The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.’ 26 Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he.’” Jesus’ announcement that something new is coming finally registered with the woman. Not only that, but she obviously was so intrigued by what Jesus had to say that she brought a teaching she had heard about Messiah into the picture — He will tell us all things. This gave Jesus the opportunity to lay out His claim — I am the Messiah.

And she bit. For we next read in John 4:27-30, “27 Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you seek?’ or, ‘Why are you talking with her?’ 28 So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, 29 ‘Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?’ 30 They went out of the town and were coming to him.”

Jesus’ claim that He is the Messiah got the woman so excited that she forgot all about her water jar and ran into town spouting a message: I never met this man in my life, yet He knew my whole life history. Can someone who knows me like this be the Messiah? I think I just met the Messiah. Come and see for yourselves. And the people came. Thus, Jesus told His disciples in John 4:35, “. . . ‘Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.’”

And this proved to be the case, because the people heard Jesus out and then invited Him to stay and teach them for several days. Therefore, at the end of it, we read in John 4:41-42, “41 And many more believed because of his [Jesus’] word. 42 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 indeed the Savior of the world.’”

Savior of the world. Now that’s a title never heard from the Jews of Jerusalem, nor of Galilee for that matter. But because the Jewish Messiah came and ministered to those without a thoroughbred Jewish pedigree, the Samaritans understood what we now take for granted, Jesus is the Savior of all the peoples of the world.

We close with the matter of living water. We read in Jeremiah 17:13, “O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.” Here we see that Yahweh Himself is the fountain of living water.

Tell me, have you ever seen pure sparkling water bubbling up from a spring? There’s something quite dramatic about it. And where a flowing spring has been tapped so that you can fill a container, there’s something very special about the clear, cool water you drink. That’s what our relationship with our Creator is meant to be like. For our very lives come from Him.

We get additional information about living water from an appearance Jesus made at the Jerusalem temple during the feast of Tabernacles in the fall before He was crucified. We read in John 7:37-39, “37 On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”’ 39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

So, this unravels the secret of living water. Yahweh, the Holy Spirit, supplies living water. And since Lord Holy Spirit is the source of the spring, this can mean only one thing. Living water is righteousness, pure and glorious.

Pure righteousness is the one thing all we sinners lack. Yet, it’s the one thing we absolutely need in order to be in relationship with our righteous Creator. It’s the one thing we need to have in order to be His true family and to be in true intimacy with Him. It’s the one thing we need in order to be in eternal life with Yahweh, instead of in hell. Yet, there is no way we can produce it in ourselves.

Did the Samaritan woman need a drink of Messiah’s living water after the life she had lead? Absolutely. But notice. Despite her life, Jesus didn’t hesitate one second to offer her His living water. And apparently she was thirsty. For, she didn’t shrink and recoil when Jesus revealed the sin of her life. Instead she rejoiced that she had found Messiah. She drank deeply of Him.

Forgiveness of sin is not mentioned in this episode. But that’s what stands behind the exchange Jesus had with this woman. We’re not told how she lived after her Jesus encounter. But I think we can be certain that she wasn’t the same. For she gladly received Jesus. And so it is for all whom the Lord calls to Himself through the forgiveness of sins.

Hear what Yahweh said to the Apostle John in the Revelation vision. Revelation 21:6-7, “6. . . ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.’” Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.