

CROSSING BARRIERS

John 4:4-30; 39-42

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Amarillo, Texas
February 24, 2019**

People have searched for a fountain of mystical, restorative waters for as long as stories have been shared. Herodotus (5th century B.C.) wrote of such water with the power of life. Alexander the Great may have been looking for a river that healed the ravages of life. The name most often linked to living water is 16th century Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon, who was supposedly hoping to find the fountain of youth in Florida.

While none of these legends ever produced living water, today you and I find it in Jesus, as He sits on the side of a Samaritan well.

Introduction

Having just heard Jesus' conversation with a Pharisee, Nicodemus, we now eavesdrop on his words to the woman at the well. The two characters in the conversations were so very different: one a man, the other a woman; one a Jew, the other a Samaritan; and one a saint, the other a sinner.

More than John (4:1-3)

In chapter 1, the Pharisees had taken notice of the prophetic activity of John the Baptist. They wanted to know why John was baptizing if he was not the Christ, Elijah, nor the prophet (1:24-28). We can be certain, therefore, that they would also observe the greater activity of Jesus, to which John's ministry had pointed. When Jesus perceives the watchful eye of the Pharisees, he decides to leave Judea, departing for the security of Galilee.

Interestingly, Jesus himself was not baptizing, as he left that task to his disciples. This passage reminds us of Paul's pondering in 1 Corinthians 1:14-17, where he cannot even remember who he baptized in the city of Corinth. The worth of our baptism is not based upon who baptized us, but in whose name and by whose command it is ministered.

The word translated "left" (v. 3) is the word that is most often translated "abandoned." In this very chapter, for example, we read about the woman who "abandoned" her water pot (4:28). Translated more precisely, we see that Jesus not only traveled away from the area of Judea, but actually rebuked his opponents with his departure.

I. Divine Appointments (4:1-9)

Through Samaria (4:4-6)

Unlike many of the Jews of his day who would have tried to avoid going through enemy territory, Jesus walked right through Samaria on his way to Galilee. The Pharisees, for example, so disliked

Samaritans that they were willing to cross the Jordan near Jericho, travel north up the east bank (the Transjordan) through Gentile territory, and then cross back to the west bank near the Sea of Galilee.

When John tells us that Jesus “had to pass through Samaria,” he is, perhaps, indicating that Jesus has a divine appointment with the woman at the well. Sychar is the name of a Samaritan town that is most likely identified with the modern village of ‘Askar, on the shoulder of Mount Ebal, opposing Mount Gerizim. Jacob’s well lies about a half mile to the south of the modern village.

This reference to both Jacob and Joseph reminds us that this divine appointment between Jesus and the woman at the well occurs on soil upon which God has been toiling for centuries. Calling in the Patriarchs as part of the story, John shows that this encounter between Jesus and the woman becomes part of the bigger biblical scene. Commentator Edward Klink captures the potent picture when he writes, “In the middle of the day, on the soil upon which God had already worked, the Christ sat at the well of Jacob.”

Having already told us that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14), John now exposes the humanity of Jesus by informing us that Jesus himself actually became weary and longed for water from the well. In his usual fashion of recording the time of an event (see 1:39), John lets us know that it is noontime (the sixth hour) when the woman comes to the well and finds a weary traveler. While there is some indication that coming to draw water at noontime was not unheard of (Exodus 2:15ff.), a much more likely time was in the coolness of the evening, after sunset. Commentators have long hypothesized that the woman came at an unusual time, noon, in order to avoid contact with other women who might repeat rumors about her.

To Draw Water (4:7-8)

While women often traveled in groups to fetch water from the well, this woman came alone. To her complete surprise, a man was waiting at the well, seeking a drink. While there is no doubt that Jesus was actually both weary and thirsty, he also, perhaps, asked for assistance as a way to begin a caring conversation. John explains that the disciples were not present to help Jesus draw water from the well, for they had gone into the city to seek food.

No Dealings (4:9)

The woman at the well is simply trying to process the request from the rabbi. How could Jesus possibly ask her for a drink of water as she was (1) a Samaritan and (2) a woman. The phrase “for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” is John’s own commentary explaining why the woman is surprised that she, a Samaritan, might possibly provide a drink of water for a Jew. To be sure, the particulars of ritual purity separated a Jewish man forever and always from a Samaritan woman.

II. Living Water (4:10-15)

If You Knew (4:10)

As he did in his conversation with Nicodemus (3:3), a member of the Sanhedrin, Jesus now lifts his conversation with the Samaritan woman to a spiritual plane. Jesus’ own thirst is, for the moment, put aside so that he may speak of the woman’s real need for “living water.” In fairness

to the woman at the well, her eyes behold nothing but a tired Jewish man. She is blind to the glory of the Son of Man who stands before her.

The expression “living water” denotes fresh, running spring water and also serves as a metaphor for wonderful spiritual nourishment. God declares in Jeremiah 2:13, “My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water.” And the prophets (Zechariah 14:8) look forward to a time when “living waters will flow out of Jerusalem.” Finally, Isaiah 55:1 declares, “Every one who thirsts, come to the waters.” More specifically, in John 4, “living water” denotes satisfying eternal life mediated by the Spirit that only Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world, can provide (compare Revelation 21: 6).

Following the pattern of Nicodemus’s “dull hearing,” the woman is unable to think of spiritual matters and dwells upon the mundane. Nicodemus couldn’t imagine anyone being born again because they “could not re-enter their mother’s womb” (3:4). In the same fashion, this lady simply wants the “living water” so she will not have to trek to the well on a daily basis (4:15).

Not Greater Than (4:11-12)

The irony is thick. A weary Jewish man is claiming that he can provide water which flows from a spring when he himself does not even have a ladle with which to meet his own thirst. Being quite content with the patriarch’s well, she challenges any notion that Jesus might provide better water than Jacob himself.

Of This Water (4:13-14)

Those who receive the abundant life (10:10), the living water, experience the strange, vigorous, ever-flowing power of the Spirit of God. Permanent satisfaction is only possible with living water that flows from the power of the Spirit. The prophet Isaiah must have certainly been the foundation for this new fountain as we read, “You will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3).

Not Be Thirsty (4:15)

Is the Samaritan woman being sarcastic, or is she truly hoping beyond hope for a water which forever and always satisfies? The passage can be read both ways, but there is no apparent reason to doubt her sincerity.

III. Seeing through our sin to our suffering (4:16-19)

Five Husbands (4:16-18)

With the precision of a prophet, Jesus now illuminates the fact that the woman herself is the one who is really spiritually parched. At the very least, she has a morally messy past and is in great need of the salvation that only the living water can provide. Hearing Jesus’ nosy command, “Go call your husband...,” the woman rebuffs with the terse but truthful response that, indeed, she has no husband. Rather than being silenced, the rabbi retorts that she speaks the truth, but behind the truth is the fact that she has previously had five husbands, and she is presently sleeping with a man who was not even her legal husband. Some scholars have noted that rabbinic tradition disapproved of more than three marriages—even if more marriages were legally permissible.

While commentators highlight the fact that Jesus has turned the discussion in order to “bring the woman’s sin into the open,” we must remember the powerless state of women in the first century. Had previous husbands divorced her, abandoned her, and left her to the whims of chance? Had she suffered as a widow several times over? While I am not trying to whitewash her misadventures, I do want us to realize that men, more than women, possessed power in first-century marriage relationships. While we shall not hide the fact that she is a sinner, we must also realize that she is a sufferer at the hands of many men.

Perceiving the Prophet (4:19)

With a moment of spiritual insight, the woman comes to the conclusion that the person before her is truly a prophet. He knows more than he should know; he perceives more than he should see. We must bear in mind that the woman’s words bear particular meaning because, as a Samaritan, she would have acknowledged no other prophet after Moses other than the one spoken of in Deuteronomy 18:18—meaning the next prophet would be the Messiah. With the word “prophet,” the woman has filled the air with messianic expectations.

IV. Worshiping in a worthy manner (4:20-24)

In This Mountain (4:20-22)

Recognizing Jesus as a prophet, or possibly more, the woman poses a question regarding the proper place of worship. Reading all of the scriptures—and not just the Pentateuch, like the Samaritans—the Jews clearly concluded that Jerusalem was the proper place of worship. Samaritans, on the other hand, were certain that Gerizim was the proper place of worship. They pointed to passages from the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12) where the people were blessed at Mount Gerizim when they entered the Promised Land. They interpreted Deuteronomy 27:4-7, probably incorrectly, as calling for an altar to be set up on Gerizim (the best texts read “Ebal”). They further asserted that Abraham’s offering of Isaac took place on Mount Gerizim, as well as the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek. Seeing the patriarchs so associated with Mount Gerizim, Samaritans argued that this should be the proper place for the faithful people of God to worship. While it is easy for those who read the entire Old Testament and New Testament to see that Jerusalem was the proper place of worship, the Samaritans only looked to the first five books of the Bible where Jerusalem is not mentioned as the explicit place of worship.

Jesus refuses to be drawn into a meaningless argument about holy mountains. The reality is that a time is coming when worship will be impossible in both places. Jesus does make clear, however, that the Samaritans worship unaware (verse 22). When we consider that they cast aside both the psalms, the prophets, and the historical books of the Old Testament, they, indeed, had a very limited view of God and how to worship him.

Make no mistake, Jesus associates himself with the Jews, not the Samaritans. It is from the Jews that salvation finds its source. Jesus, representing a true Jew, is the one through whom all the people of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Salvation was indeed from the Jews, but it was intended to flow to all nations.

In Truth and Spirit (4:23-24)

Jesus is referring to a new era of worship in which God is not tied to any particular place. To worship “in spirit and in truth” may mean that worship is not simply guided by being in the “right place” but, rather, having the “right attitude.” Alternatively, “Spirit” may refer to the Holy Spirit (compare 14:17, Spirit of Truth). When Jesus says “an hour is coming,” we cannot miss his allusion to the forthcoming cross as the central component of true worship. An hour “is coming” in the fact that the Passion (crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus) has not yet happened, but “now is” in the sense that the Word has already become flesh and dwells among us (John 1:14). This “new” worship can only take place as it centers upon the Christ himself, for he, indeed, is the only true temple (2:19-22).

To say “God is Spirit” is to draw upon Old Testament passages where the Spirit is seen as creative and life-giving. Being Spirit, God is invisible, divine as opposed to human, and known to only those to whom he reveals himself (1:18). John also tells us that “God is light” and “God is love” (1 John 1:5; 4:8).

V. Realizing this Rabbi is He (4:25-38)

Is Coming (4:25-26)

There are messianic prophecies in the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch. The Samaritans, therefore, did expect a Messiah. Because they rejected the rest of God’s word, however, their knowledge and information about him was sparse, at best.

The climax of the conversation finally arrives. Jesus declares, “I am He,” literally translated “I am.” This echoes God’s name as he gave it to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3:13-14. Moses confessed to his God, “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

I am often amazed when skeptics declare that Jesus never really claimed to be the Messiah. Passages like this clarify the issue beyond debate: Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the I AM of the Old Testament. In this setting with the Samaritan woman, it was safe for Jesus to declare his true identity.

The Woman’s Witness (4:27-30)

The disciples return from their search for food. To their surprise, they find their rabbi holding a conversation with a woman at the well. It was considered undesirable for such a teacher to speak to a woman, especially given the fact that this woman was a Samaritan. Despite their astonishment, the disciples choose to neither question the woman (the first hypothetical question), nor their master (the second hypothetical question). They had been around Jesus long enough to know that he did not always respect or observe the conventions of the rabbis.

Despite the fact that the woman had traveled so far to retrieve water, she abandons her pot and runs because she has met “the prophet.” Back in the village, she invites all to come and see Jesus because he has told her everything that she ever did. She poses the greatest question of history as

she ends her dialogue, “This is not the Christ, is it?” This is asked in such a way that a negative answer might be expected, but a positive one is hoped for. Listening to the words from the woman, the men go out of the city and kept on “coming to him.”

VI. Making the Messiah your own (4:39-42)

We Have Heard (4:39-42)

With this last segment of the story, we reach a wonderful end as many Samaritans proclaim Jesus as “the Savior of the world.” The gospel, which begins with the Jews, has now moved to the Samaritans (see Acts 1:8). Jesus’ detailed and intimate knowledge of the woman’s past made a profound impression upon her. She could not wait to tell others, who then heard for themselves and also believed.

These new believers were not ready to lose the Messiah they had just found. They kept on asking him—meaning they begged him—to stay, to dwell with them for a few days. Jesus complied, spending two days with his new Samaritan believers. As a result, even more Samaritans came to know Jesus as the Messiah, and, ultimately, they all personalized their belief. They believed—no longer because of what the woman said but, rather, because of what they themselves heard—“this one is indeed Savior of the world.” The expression “Savior of the world” occurs again in 1 John 4:14 and nowhere else in the New Testament. It is a clear recognition of Jesus as Savior not just for the Jews, but for the whole creation.

Jesus crosses many barriers to converse with the woman at the well—gender barriers, religious barriers, and ethnic barriers. When was the last time you crossed barriers to tell someone about God’s grace? At funerals, I know I am burying a barrier-breaker when I see a diversity of attendees at the service—different ethnicities, different ages, different cultures. How diverse will the crowd be on the day of your funeral? How many barriers have you crossed with your friendships?

Conclusion

Yes, folks have searched for the fountain forever. And today, you and I find it in Christ. Read Revelation 21:5ff.

Animosity with Samaritans—Further study

The animosity between Jews and Samaritans was both ancient and intense. Samaritans were thought to be the descendants of the union between undeported Northern Kingdom inhabitants and foreign colonists brought in from Babylon and Media by the Assyrian conquerors of Samaria (2 Kings 17:24-41). Unfortunately, the Samaritans combined worship of the God of Israel with worship of the gods of Babylon, creating a conflict with the Jewish religion. Unlike the Jews, moreover, the Samaritans only acknowledged the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), ignoring the psalms and the prophets as part of God’s sacred scripture. Animosity was further extended when the Jews rejected the Samaritan’s offer to help the Jews rebuild their temple (Ezra 4:3). Another clear difference that emerges in John 4 is that Samaritans preferred to worship on Mount Gerizim, while the Jews, of course, insisted on worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Finally, all hope of reconciliation between Jews and Samaritans was lost when the Jews actually burned the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim in 128 B.C.

