

The Woman at the Well  
John 4:1-42  
February 6, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church  
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Do you remember falling in love? It can happen so quickly, love at first sight! Our daughter Anna once went on a first date with a co-worker she hardly knew. They went to dinner and had tickets for the theater later, but they ended up talking at the restaurant for four hours, and didn't realize till the restaurant was closing that they had missed their show. They just "got" each other in that first conversation, and by the end of the evening she was head over heels in love.

Whether it happens all at once or slowly over time, there is this moment, when you realize that this person knows you perhaps better than you know yourself, and you feel safe in that knowing. You can lose all your pent-up loneliness and sadness, all the guarding of your innermost self in the comfort and pure deliciousness of that moment.

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Now, you may not have thought so when we read the scripture a moment ago, but this is a love story, too. It has all the elements of a classic Old Testament love story: the setting, the unexpected characters, and that moment of knowing. Let's look at each of these.

First, the setting. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at a well. So many of the great Old Testament love stories revolve around a chance encounter at a well: Isaac and Rebecca, Moses and Zipporah, and especially – oh especially! – Jacob and his dearest love Rachel.

In today's scripture the Samaritan woman comes to the well at midday. Just as on every other day of her life, she comes to draw water, carrying a heavy jug. It is hard labor. Woman's work.

Usually, the women come to the well in the morning or the evening, when the sun isn't beating down. But today, this woman comes at the hottest hour of the day to draw her water and trudge with it back to her home in Sychar.

So, it is the need for water that brings her to this well. She is not really expecting to find her true love. After all, no matter how you read this story, it is clear that love has not treated her kindly. But it has to be at the back of her mind that she might just meet a stranger – the stranger her heart has been waiting for – because this isn't just any well. It is Jacob's own well, the well where he met his beloved Rachel. Maybe, just maybe, this trip to the well will be about more than drawing up another heavy jug of water on a hot day. Maybe, just maybe.

So, this love story, like all good Old Testament love stories, is set at a well. Then there are the unexpected characters.

Jesus is travelling from Jerusalem to Galilee, and he takes the most direct route, through Samaria. You can see from the map on the front of your bulletin, it's a pretty straight shot. But it's not the way that most Jews made that trip. Typically, they took a longer route, over by the Jordan River, just to avoid going through Samaria where "those people" lived. The Samaritans, whose religion was akin to their own, but also different. Samaritans, who thought that pure worship of God could only take place on Mt. Gerezim, not at the Temple in Jerusalem. Samaritans, who shared a history with the people of Judea, who also traced their ancestry back to Jacob, but who had been invaded so many times that their culture and religion had become somehow "adulterated." Samaritans. "Them." We shouldn't expect to see Jesus at this well at all, but here he is.

All the great Old Testament love stories include a stranger from far away. And so, Jesus, a stranger in these parts, a tired and dusty traveler, a man, a Jew, a rabbi, the very last person you would expect, stops at Jacob's well in Samaria. And Jesus sits at the well, just waiting for the Samaritan women to come and draw out some water for him to drink. Waiting for the conversation that will change the course of history, the one that will spread the good news not just to the people of Judea, but to Samaritans as well (Samaritans!), and then to the whole world.

Sure enough, along comes the Samaritan woman. The Bible doesn't give her the courtesy of a name, but she is central to this story. And she is not the type of person you would expect to see at the center of a love story, either.

Now, right away I have to deal with something that we only learn a little way into her conversation with Jesus. This woman has had five husbands, and the man she is living with now is not her husband. Over the centuries, this has been interpreted to mean that the woman is sexually promiscuous and should be condemned. You have probably heard

sermons like that. But I want to point out that there are reasons other than promiscuity for what is said about her here. She could have been widowed, even five times. Or she could have been forced by a hard life and terrible vulnerability into choices that you or I would hope we never have to make. Or maybe she was promiscuous, as others have suggested over the years. We just don't know. What we do know is that love has not been kind to her, and Jesus doesn't condemn her. We shouldn't either.

So, here is this woman who has had a difficult life, and she is coming from the city to the well at the middle of the day, not at morning or evening when it would be cooler, as the other women do. Some have inferred from this that she is being shunned by the other women of the village, perhaps for her sexual behavior, perhaps for some other reason, and she chooses to come to the well in the heat of the day to avoid their scorn. But maybe she is here because God called her to come just now, just as God called Jesus to journey unexpectedly through Samaria, precisely so that they can meet and have this life changing, earth shattering conversation.

First, they speak of water, and there is this classic confusion that is typical of this gospel. Jesus tries to explain something infinite and spiritual in concrete terms, and the person he is speaking to can only hear the literal meaning. We saw this last week in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus about the need to be born again. Here, Jesus speaks of living water that will quench thirst forever, water that will gush up to eternal life. And the woman, wanting to be done forever with coming to this well, asks Jesus to give her this water. Jesus is speaking metaphorically. The woman is hearing literally.

The well. The unexpected characters. And then the moment of knowing. Jesus cuts to the chase. He reveals that he knows her through and through. "You have had five husbands," he says, "and the one you have now is not your husband." There it is. No more parrying about literal water and spiritual water. Just this. He doesn't condemn her. He just shows that he knows her, and that she is safe in that knowing. She loses all her pent-up loneliness and sadness, all the guarding of her innermost self in the comfort and pure deliciousness of that moment.

Two things happen next, and I think they are both wonderful. The first is that she has some questions for him. This woman asks Jesus about the most important theological issue that separates Jews and Samaritans: where can we worship God? She jumps straight into a master class in theology. He says the place of worship doesn't matter. What matters is worshiping God in spirit and in truth.

In this response, the woman recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus, using the famous name of God from Moses' encounter at the burning bush, says, "I am." Jesus knows the woman fully. He knows her deepest secrets, and he makes it safe for her to know him fully, too. She has met the Messiah.

Then the second thing happens that I think is so wonderful. She leaves her water jar. Can you imagine that? She no longer needs it because now she has the living water Jesus has promised. She leaves her water jar and runs to the people in the city and tells them, come see this man. Can he be the Messiah? Come see this man who told me everything I had ever done.

The Samaritan woman has found the living water, but she doesn't keep it to herself. She shares it with everyone she meets, and through her, they come to believe in Jesus, too.

This is not an ordinary love story, but the very best kind. It is a story of the love of God for a woman who is in a hard place in life, a woman whose soul is as dry as the dusty road, whose heart is parched. It is love at first sight, thirst-quenching, soul-satisfying love. The same love that God offers to each of us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen