

Sermon – March 15, 2020
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text - John 4:5-42 (selected)

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. 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.)

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."

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these Words, make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry. Amen

I am the gate keeper of Sychar a famous town of Samaria. Sychar is close to the mountain where we once worshiped God in our temple. A temple now long destroyed. Yet often our priests will worship God there on the mountain with sacrifices. It is the place where the Israelites first built an altar to God when they came into the promised land. It is a fitting place to worship God. It is also the place where our father Jacob purchased a field and in it dug a well. He and his sons drank from the well and there also watered their flocks. The well is still there today and continues to give us life-sustaining water. The well is just a short walk from the town gate. You can't see the well from the gate of Sychar. One can only see the path that leads to the well and to the road between Judea and Galilee. The well is deep, but in its depths the water flows forth from the earth.

I sit in the gate and watch our town. I sit here with whoever comes out to do business in the gate and listen, serving as a witness to transactions of the town. I will guide the occasional visitor to the market or a family's home they are seeking. I keep track of the men as they go out to work their fields, making sure they return as planned. And I watch the town from sunrise to sunset in case there is a need for help among our people. I have seen much over my years of watching, but one day stands out above all of the others - the day that Jesus came to Jacob's well.

It was a day like any other at first. The men went to their fields early in the morning, the shops were set up, and opened for the day, the women went to get water at the well, to talk, share with each other, and then return with water for their homes and families. They went early in the morning with children in tow, going to the well as our ancestors did.

Now our town does get an occasional visitor, usually from other towns in Samaria as they travel the road that is close to the well. But this day as I watched, I saw twelve men coming up the path from the well. They were in no hurry and seemed a friendly lot. They were Jews, rare visitors for Sychar, for there is little love between our people from long years of disagreement over the worship of God. They stopped in the gate and asked where they might find food. I directed them to the market and they went off as those who had been sent on a task by a master and were anxious to complete their task. They were a bit rough looking, common men for the most part, those whose hands witnessed to the labor that marked their life. They would be no trouble and would pay a fair price for what they wanted to buy; they knew well the cost of laboring for daily bread. Some of our shopkeepers would be blessed this day by their arrival. Yet they were Jews and would need to have an eye kept on them just in case they wanted to argue about religion. It was obvious that they had been on the road for a while, probably heading

from Judea to Galilee. We had a few other visitors recently who had passed through, returning from where John the Baptist had been preaching in the wilderness.

It was about noon when our Jewish visitors arrived, and I had missed seeing her slip out of the gate while I focused on them. You could count on her to show up just as the sun reached its peak in the noon day sky. I looked up the path to the well and there she was making her way to the well carrying her water jug. She did not go with the other women early in the morning to get water. They shunned her and she avoided them. I suspect that she was often the topic of their talks at the well. Her life had been difficult in our town. Her marriages ended, she struggled to find her way, she struggled to be cared for, she struggled to be part of life in our town. I felt sorry for her as she walked down the road to the well. She walked as one who carried great burdens, head down, eyes alert to others. She was keeping to the edge of the path, always looking to avoid others. She was lonely, hurting, and broken. Yet she too needed water from the well to live. As one who watched, I always hoped that she would find her way, find a better relationship, one that would bring healing into her troubled life. Yet for some time she had been making this same journey every day, for her a long, lonely walk down to the well and back with water for her and her man.

Our Jewish visitors had not even seen her; she had a way of avoiding being seen even in the brightness of a noon day sun. They had passed each other without a word. The men were Jews and would not have spoken to her even if they had seen her, for she was a woman and a Samaritan at that, not someone a Jewish man would speak to or be seen with if he could avoid it.

Our visitors disappeared around the buildings and headed into the market. Nothing else moved in the town. Most people were in their homes either preparing or enjoying a noon time meal. I settled back in the shade to watch as the heat of the day came. It did not take our Jewish

visitors long to buy what they needed, and they headed back down the path to the well, leaving us without causing any issues. They had just passed out of sight when I saw someone coming.

That is when I saw her coming back from the well. I did not recognize her at first. She was in a hurry. She was walking, almost running towards the gate, no longer on the edge of the path but in the middle. She did not have her jar. Her head was held high, and was that a smile on her face? She was in a hurry. Something was up, something was very different about her manner. Something had happened to her at the well. She stopped at the gate, looked me in the eye and began to speak to me. I was shocked. What had happened to the woman who did not want to be seen, more less heard? She began to talk in an excited voice. I don't recall ever hearing her speak so many words. She said she had met a Jew named Jesus at the well. He had told her everything about her, how she had had five husbands and now lived with a man who was not her husband. She kept repeating this over and over, that he told her everything she had ever done. She said these are the words of a prophet. She said, "This cannot be the Messiah, can it?" As soon as she told me this, she went to look for another man to talk to. She was actually seeking out people to talk to. She stopped and told every man she could find in the village these same words that Jesus had told her and she would end each conversation with "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" and then she would run to another man and tell him the same thing. Her excitement seemed to grow with each encounter. The more she talked, the more people came out of their homes to hear what she had to say. The town was beginning to stir. People were beginning to talk. Men were beginning to follow her around town. What is she saying? What does she mean by "Messiah"? We knew that there was to come in the last days another prophet like Moses, but why would he be at Jacob's well? Why would he be at our well? Could she really have talked to a prophet? Could this be the prophet that we had long expected? He had told her

things about her that we knew to be true, things that a Jewish man passing by on the road would have no way of knowing. We who had talked about her so much might know, but could a passing Jew know such things? Could there be a prophet at Jacob's well?

It did not take long for her to gather a group of men from the town. She came to the gate leading a number of men and telling them to come with her to the well and meet Jesus, this prophet who had told her everything she had ever done. She was in a hurry to get back to the well with them. She was telling them to come and meet Jesus and see if they thought he could be the expected one, the Messiah that Moses had told us of. They could see the change in her and followed her to the well. I left the gate and went along.

When I think about it now, I wonder why we went. I think we went because we could see the change in her. We went because we wanted to believe her words that a prophet was at the well. We went because she was so excited and bold in her witness to what she had experienced. If he knew about her, he might also know about us. We went to hear this prophet, this Jesus, for ourselves.

When we got to the well, Jesus was talking with his disciples, something about fields ripe for the harvest. I was not sure then what those words meant, but now I know he was talking about us, this group of men led by a joyous woman. Those she had brought were the harvest Jesus was telling his disciples about. When we arrived at the well, Jesus welcomed us. It was so strange to be welcomed by a Jew. It was as if he was expecting us and waiting for us to come. We had questions and he began to teach us. What wonderful words he shared! It did not take long before we also realized that he truly was the prophet. He was the Messiah. Not quite the one that we had expected, not quite the one who we had hoped for, but a very different prophet. He was one who loved people, all people - Jew and Samaritan alike. He was one who taught us, not

as our teachers taught, but as one who had great authority. He was found at the well where there was life-sustaining water, but his words went deep into the hearts of many who heard them, and they changed us. His words became something new within us. We heard about a coming kingdom that was breaking in. We heard about life in this new kingdom. We heard about how we should live as those in this new kingdom are to live. We who had gone with the woman to the well so wanted to hear more, so we asked Jesus to stay and he agreed. For two days he stayed in our town, teaching us, talking to us, helping us to understand who he is and who God is. Those were two wonderful days. His disciples were very quiet. They too listened to his words as if they also were being changed as he spoke. As he spoke in our town during those days, many more in the town believed because of his words. We came to understand as we heard his words for ourselves, that this Jew, this prophet, was indeed the Messiah, that he was truly the savior of the whole world.

I will never forget what she did for us by coming back to town and inviting us to go and meet Jesus at the well. I still watch from the gate, looking down the path to the well for Jesus to come again, to return and tell us more about the kingdom of God, to lead us into this new kingdom. Every day now, instead of hiding in the shadows, she tells everyone who will listen to her testimony. She tells how she met Jesus at the well and how he told her everything she ever did. She shares with everyone how her life has been changed by an encounter with Jesus. So many of our lives here in Sychar have been changed by meeting Jesus. Our town of Sychar has never been the same. I hope that Jesus will come again and teach us more about life in this new kingdom and help us to live as people of that kingdom. I hope his kingdom will come soon and that we may be part of it. Before he left, many of us understood that he is truly the savior of the whole world. He went on back down the path and passed by the well to the road and on to

Galilee. He said that he had other people to tell about the coming kingdom, that he had much work to do. I wonder what happened to this true Messiah we met at the well.

Pray with me: Father, help us to be those who will tell others about Jesus. Lord, help us to be those whose lives are changed and who joyfully share the Good News with all who will hear. Lord, give us courage to tell others about a man who knows all that we ever did and loves us still. Amen

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Go forth into Jesus’ mission.