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A Well, A Water Jar, And a Journey of Divine Necessity

by
D'Esta Love

The fourth chapter of John contains the longest recorded discourse between Jesus and an individual in all the gospel material. It occurs between Jesus and an obscure, unnamed woman of Samaria, who stands in contrast to Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews who comes at night with his inquiries and uncertain questions. She, on the other hand, is a contaminated Samaritan woman, living on the fringe even of her own community, who encounters Jesus in the full light of day and emerges as a model disciple, both because of her faith and her witness. In contrast, the text of the third chapter leaves Nicodemus with his incredulous question, "How can this be?"

The narrative concerning the Samaritan woman opens with a journey motif. Jesus has left Judea and is on his way to Galilee. In describing the course of the journey, the writer of the fourth gospel uses the language of necessity when he says Jesus had to pass through Samaria.

This past winter those of us living in Malibu, California, often used the language of necessity in describing our journey from Malibu to "the valley." When we said, "I had to go through Kanan Road," we meant that Pacific Coast Highway was flooded, the Malibu bridge was closed, and there was a landslide on Malibu Canyon Road. We had no other option. It was a geographic necessity to go by way of Kanan Road. Jesus, on the other hand, had other ways by which to reach Galilee. This was not a journey of

geographic but divine necessity; he had to pass through Samaria.

Having set a tone of the urgency of divine intent, the narrative begins with casual detail. It is noontime, the disciples have gone into the city for food, Jesus is tired and he stops to rest by Jacob's well for he is weary from the journey. Unexpectedly a woman enters the scene to draw water from the well, and Jesus asks for a drink for he is thirsty and has nothing with which to draw, and the well is deep.

The woman's caustic response to his request for water suggests this is no casual story. Conscious of her status before him, she asks, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Her question signals that something is wrong here. The disciples certainly believe that something is out of the ordinary when they return from the village and marvel in puzzled amazement that Jesus is talking with a woman (4:27). Perhaps we could ask, "What is wrong with this picture?"

The text provides some explanation when the reader is informed that "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (4:9). Could there be more? Perhaps we should back up. What is this woman doing at a well in the heat of the day? Why is she alone? The customary times for women to gather at wells are morning or evening (Gen 24:11; Gen 29:7) and always in the company of other women. Her presence at the well at a public hour alone is culturally "wrong." It suggests she is socially isolated, shunned by proper

women. In subsequent verses the text reveals a possible explanation as to why she is alone. As Jesus reveals her life with multiple sexual partners we may have an insight into her deviant behavior which has marked her as a sinner of notoriety to be shunned.

Furthermore, the woman's initial response to Jesus reveals the unusual nature of this encounter. Culturally it is "wrong" for Jesus to speak with a woman to whom he is not related, particularly a Samaritan with a tainted past. As a Samaritan she is considered by Jews a contaminated person, but as a Samaritan woman she is considered menstruant from birth, thus continually unclean. Jesus disregards these social barriers and is willing to "stoop so low" as to drink from her polluted vessel and receive her hospitality.

There is much that is wrong with this picture, but it is of no consequence to Jesus. She may be a Samaritan, she may be a woman, she may even be a sinner, but he deems her a worthy candidate for the Kingdom. In fact, he engages her in a theological discussion and teaches her, although it was considered an obscene waste of a Rabbi's time to teach a woman. This is not a casual story. Jesus had to go through Samaria.

She, however, had to go to the well to draw water. Her's is a journey of physical necessity as she needs the water to drink, to prepare her meals, to clean her house, to bathe her children, to wash her clothes. It is necessary to draw water from this well to fulfill her domestic tasks and to sustain her life in the flesh. Thus, in the routine of her day she comes to the well to draw water and encounters a man who exposes to the light all that she is and all she has ever done.

Is this not often the way with God? Does he not meet us in the routine of our days? Does he not speak our names while we sleep, appear to us while pasturing our sheep, kneel beside us as we beg alongside the road, come to us while repairing our nets, or meet us when we come to the well to draw water? It is while on our journeys of physical necessity that God's divine necessity often confronts us.

Thus, in the routine of her day Jesus takes the initiative to move her beyond her obligations to the flesh. He entices her with a gift. "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" (4:10). The topic changes from the water of Jacob's well to an ever-flowing stream of living water. Jesus' role also changes from the one receiving a drink to the one who offers drink to her. He actually enters her world and assumes the task of the female to serve the water. While he is speaking of spiritual water, the gift of God, she

understands him to mean water from a fountainhead or a spring, for that is what "living water" meant in her world. Her eagerness for this convenience for her life is expressed in her words, "Where do you get that living water" (4:11)? Such a gift would mean she would never have to journey to the well again, exposed and alone, to draw water.

It is not water from a living spring of which Jesus speaks. It is the fount of God which wells up within us and gives us eternal life. He makes a distinction for her. "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst . . ." (4:13-14). She understands him to say that he will give her an unending supply of water so she will never be thirsty and never have to make the difficult journey to the well to draw. Excited by the possibility of such a gift for her life, she eagerly asks, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw" (4:15). Her response is not unlike Nicodemus' when he asks, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (3:4). They both respond out of the reality of flesh; Jesus is speaking to them of the reality of spirit.

We all live our lives at the level of flesh, at the level of Jacob's well. We must do those things which are necessary to sustain our lives in the flesh. My Jacob's well is a desk. Perhaps yours is a classroom or a hospital, a computer or a washing machine, an airplane or a tractor. But we all go to the well to draw. I go about the routine of my life each day because it is necessary to sustain my life in the flesh. I go to the office, I get my paycheck, I put it in the bank and it is gone. I go to the supermarket, I buy our groceries, I put them in the refrigerator and they are gone. I must continually go to the well to draw. It is the rhythm of my life in the flesh. The point is this, the water in our Jacob's wells does not satisfy. We thirst again and must go back to the well to draw.

But Jesus says, "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:14). He did not tell the woman she would not have to return to the well to draw. She will always have to go to her Jacob's well. But he tells her that when she drinks from Jacob's well she will thirst again, for it does not satisfy.

There is, however, within her a thirst that can be satisfied with the living water of God, and Jesus leads her on a metaphoric journey which allows her to discover her need for God. He takes her to the center of her metaphoric thirst—the emptiness, the hunger within her that cannot be satisfied with the water from Jacob's well. He asks about her husband and reveals the truth that she has had five husbands

and is living with a man to whom she is not married. He does not bring this knowledge to the light to expose or punish her but to reach the hidden depth of her and her heart and her need. He does not chastise or scold her like a child, but he offers to serve her, to fulfill her need, to give her life. He extends his grace and offers living water which can satisfy her thirst, her yearning to be whole.

Perceiving Jesus to be a prophet, and still uncertain about this encounter, she shifts the topic to an age-old debate between Samaritans and Jews regarding the “right” place “where men ought to worship.” In his discourse with her concerning true worship, he leads her to a new understanding of God and those who worship him. God is spirit and the true worshipers—regardless of place, race, or gender—are those born of spirit who come to him through Jesus, the embodiment of truth. “For such the Father seeks to worship him” (4:23). Jesus had to go through Samaria.

This Samaritan woman talks with a man who knows all she ever did, yet treats her as worthy of his attention and his acceptance. She freely stands before him in the honesty of her life and catches a glimpse of a new relationship based on spirit and truth, not status based on gender and race. It sparks a hope within her—could this be the Messiah? At this moment, Jesus chooses to reveal himself to her, the first full revelation by Jesus of himself in this Gospel. He confesses before her, “I who speak to you am he” (4:26). With this revelation the Gospel writer begins a series of “I am” sayings which reveal the life-giving and sustaining nature of Jesus.

At this powerfully engaging moment the disciples burst upon the scene, filled with amazement that Jesus is talking with this woman. But she leaves the well, and her water jar, behind and goes into the city. The disciples are concerned with status and custom as well as temporal matters, the physical necessities of food and drink. Jesus speaks of food of which they do not know, and they respond in the same manner as the woman when she was introduced to living water. But Jesus’ food—that which sustains him and satisfies—is to do the will of God, and he invites them to look to the fields for they are white unto harvest.

Meanwhile, the woman has left her water jar. It is a turning point in her story. She leaves it behind, along with the concerns of the flesh it symbolizes. She has come to know a new reality which is the fount of God welling up within her to eternal life. She has seen a new vision, which is a field that is white unto harvest. Empowered by her encounter with Jesus and no longer conscious of her social status, she hastens to Sychar, alone and at a public hour, and testifies to her community. “Come and see

a man who told me all that I ever did” (4:29). And from the reservoir of her emerging faith and her experience with Jesus she dares to hope that all her dreams and expectations have come true, “Can this be the Christ?” (4:29). Because of her witness to the good news concerning Jesus, many believed on her. Hers becomes a journey of divine necessity, a river of living water (7:38). Consequently many in the city of Sychar came to believe on him, first because of her message and second because they went, at her urging, and saw for themselves and believed that “this indeed is the Savior of the world” (4:2).

We, like this woman of Samaria, have to go to our wells to draw water and in the routine of our days God draws alongside our Jacob’s wells and fills them with living water. Perhaps he whispers your name in a moment of despair, reveals himself in the rising sun, comes to you through words of encouragement or a scripture remembered or a prayer answered. Perhaps he speaks to your heart as he often does to mine—through the hymns of my childhood, of my faith. Many times in the routine of my day I find myself singing, “under his wings I am safely abiding,” or “Jesus loves me,” or “Oh, Love, that will not let me go; I rest my weary soul in thee.” Each time this happens God has drawn alongside my Jacob’s well and said, “D’Esta, there is more to your life than this. There is more to you life than this water jar.”

A few years ago I experienced the adult onset of epilepsy. In the fall of 1984, I had my first grand mal seizure. On such occasions I lose my memory for awhile and this was no exception. The attendant at my side in the ambulance was asking me questions. “What is your name?” “What day is this?” “How old are you?” “What is your husband’s name?” Simple questions. I understood them; I just didn’t know the answers. I was frightened and confused. But a well sprung up within me, and, at a time when I could not remember my own name, I heard myself say, “Sweet will of God, still fold me closer, ‘til I am wholly lost in thee.” I believe God drew alongside my Jacob’s well and filled it with living water.

Jesus had to go through Samaria. She had to go to the well to draw. God drew alongside her well, as he does ours, and filled it with living water. The fount of God welled up within her, she lifted her eyes to the harvest and left her jar. The woman of Samaria calls us to come with her—to receive the gift of God—to begin our own journeys of divine necessity for the fields are white unto harvest and the laborers are few.

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