



A woman comes to a well in the middle of the day,
and there she has an encounter that changes the course of her life.

She meets Jesus, and he sees her –

who she really is, what her life has been, her thirst for knowing God.

Like the fishermen who (in other gospel stories) leave their nets

to become fishers of people, disciples of Jesus,

she leaves her water jar behind and rushes to tell others about Jesus.

It's a story we know – but how well do we really know it?

Let's go back and take a closer look.

The story begins when Jesus decides to leave Jerusalem and travel back to Galilee.

John says he has to go through Samaria to get there –

but it is not a geographical necessity.

Rather, it is necessary for Jesus to go through Samaria in order to fulfill his mission,
and teach his disciples.

After his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus announced his purpose –

for God so loved the world that God sent the only son,

so that whoever lives in him will have eternal life.

Now, he has an opportunity to show the disciples what he means by “the world.”

Jesus chooses a route that takes him through the region of Samaria

where people worship differently

and have different ethnic heritage than the Jews.

The relationship between the peoples is marked by mistrust and judgment.



Jesus comes to a well in Samaria at noon, and his disciples go to get food.

A Samaritan woman comes to draw water,

and Jesus asks her for a drink.

She is surprised – to find a Jewish man at the well,

to have him address her, a woman alone.

What happens next is the longest discussion Jesus has with anyone in the gospels.

Jesus and this woman talk about thirst, and worship, and the reality of her life.

Jesus reveals himself to her as the Messiah.

And she goes from him,

her joy filling her like a spring of water gushing up to eternal life –

and tells her people about her encounter with Jesus.



It is important, given the history of interpretation of this story,
to take note of what the story does not say.

The story does not say the woman is a sinner,
or that Jesus forgives her.

This is not a story of a promiscuous woman forgiven and set free from sin.

That interpretation has come from the one statement,

“You have had five husbands,
and the man you live with now is not your husband.”

For centuries, that statement has been taken as a sign of the woman’s sinful past.

But that reading does not take into account the reality of women in ancient Judea.

There are various reasons a woman might have a series of husbands –

but few are her fault, since she cannot initiate a divorce.

Perhaps she has been widowed.

Perhaps she is barren, and has been set aside by multiple husbands.

In that culture, a woman had no social standing on her own,

so one way a widow without a child could survive

was to be married to her husband’s brother, or taken into his household.

Perhaps the man she is living with is a brother-in-law.

Whatever her history, it is likely to be a tragic and difficult one.

She does not have a husband or child to support her,

which makes her vulnerable and dependent.

--Images – seem to lean toward woman as promiscuous



Jesus speaks with this Samaritan woman, and he *sees* her

He sees her situation, her history, her truth.

He invites her into vulnerable conversation with the words

“Go, call your husband.”

And she realizes that he sees her, he knows her –

and doesn’t judge or pity her, but treats her as human,

a person worthy of prolonged conversation and connection.

What’s more, Jesus reveals who he is to this woman –

the first time in John’s gospel that he reveals himself as the Messiah.

Like the Jews, the Samaritans are waiting for the coming of the Messiah,

the one sent from God to rescue them.

The woman says, “I know that Messiah is coming.

When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”

And Jesus says, “I am.”

“I am the Messiah, speaking to you here and now.”

Most English translations add an article here,

to make it a proper English statement – “I am he.”

But what Jesus says is “I am” – claiming for himself the name God gave to Moses; identifying himself fully with God who was, and is, and is to come.

And the woman sees him, and understands who he is,
and her life is changed.

She goes back to her town, and tells everyone about Jesus.

In the Orthodox church, they have honored this unnamed woman with a name – Photini, which means light – and they have a whole tradition of how she faithfully believed in Jesus and eventually became a martyr.

A very different perspective than the Western tradition that named her a sinner.

Writer Debie Thomas wrote about the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman,

What Jesus does when he enters into conversation with a Samaritan woman is radical and risky; it stuns his own disciples, because it asks them to dream of a different kind of social and religious order. A different kind of kingdom.

Jesus’s willingness to break the social rules of his day means that we, his followers, must live into the truth that people are more than the sum of their political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. Jesus calls us to put aside the stereotypes we carry, the prejudices we nurse, the social and cultural lines we draw. He invites us to look at the Samaritan woman and see a sister and an apostle, not a harlot, a heretic, a foreigner, or a threat.



Jesus and the Samaritan woman have every reason to avoid one another.

That’s what’s expected of them, by culture, by stories they’ve heard.

If they’d gone along with the assumptions they’d been taught –
the mistrust and contempt they’d been taught to feel for each other –
the woman’s life would never have changed,
her community never have heard about the Messiah come among them.

What does this say to us, now, when so much of our culture is telling us who to trust,
and who to mistrust, judge and dismiss?

How often have we entered an encounter with someone already sure what we will find,
because of their appearance or the bumper stickers on their car
or what someone else has told us about them?

How often have we seen someone in crisis and made assumptions about their past,
their abilities, the decisions they've made?

We don't know the history of the Samaritan woman –
although we can resist the sexist tradition which has said
that any woman who is not a wife or a virgin is a sinner.

But Jesus looks past the assumptions and prejudice and sees who she is,
a human being standing with him in the bright sunlight.

Debie Thomas writes,

*"I see you for who you are", he tells her, "and I love you. Now see who I
am. The Messiah. The one in whom you can find freedom, love, healing, and
transformation.
Spirit and Truth. Eternal life. Living Water. Drink of me, and live."*

In this encounter, Jesus invites us to see ourselves and each other through eyes of
love, not judgment.

What might our world look like if we met one another,
not with assumptions and stereotypes and mistrust,
but with eyes wide open, ready to see one another in God's love?
It might change everything.
Most of all, it might change us.

May we know that we, too, are seen and loved by Jesus –
and sent into the world to share that love and grace.

May we, too, be open to unexpected encounters
and transformations of love.

Amen.