

We've all heard the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well. But have we asked ourselves with what eyes have we understood her? How do we come to Scripture? Why is the Word of God described as "living water?" Kate engages these questions in this sermon from the Third Sunday of Lent, based on John 4:5-42

I went through most of the week having no clue what I was going to write for today. It's not that there's nothing to say about this story. There is endless material. In fact, countless sermons have been written about this woman at the well. The woman who has no name. Yet, we know she has had five husbands, and is going on the sixth. That she is a Samaritan who dares to speak with a Jewish man although cultural mores prohibit such an encounter. We know she comes to the well at noon, all alone, and that she is conversant in the conflicting beliefs of Jews and Samaritans.

Beyond that, we know little. But preachers have had a field day with her – making her out to be both a wayward soul who Jesus, in his infinite compassion, saves, and on the other end of the spectrum, a kind of feminist hero, who dares to disregard a woman's boundaries, and becomes a preacher of the Word – “Come and see what I have found!”

At different times in my life, I have made her out to be many things. I have related to her as a woman who couldn't seem to fit into what others expected of her, grateful that Jesus could see beyond those expectations into something deeper. And I have also seen her as a woman of courage and independence, speaking what she wanted with whom she wanted, and clearly holding her own. Perhaps more than any text we hear on Sunday, this one proves what Richard Rohr teaches in the book we are studying on Saturdays (*The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*). He writes: “After almost forty years of teaching and preaching, I can say: You see the text through your available eyes. You hear a text from your own level of development and consciousness... *We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are.*”

And so, I am back at the beginning, having no clue what to say. Only now I have a suspicion why. My eyes are again changing. My **focus is shifting**. If I tried to go back to an old sermon on this reading, it would certainly ring stale and inauthentic. For when I was suffering the sting of my divorce, I felt the judgment and the suffering of

her relational history, and could preach the balm of Jesus' grace. And when I was coming into my own as a theologian and preacher, I resonated with her lively, inquiring mind. Full of heart truth then, it is not how the Spirit is speaking to me now.

Don't get me wrong, these messages are still there for those with eyes and hearts to see. But I have come into a different place where new things jump from the page. First, take the simple meeting at the well at noon. Scholars have had numerous hypotheses on why she may have been there then – the hottest part of the day. Perhaps she is shunned and is not allowed to be with the others. Perhaps she has been banned from using the well at the regular times. But with my new eyes, she is out there at noon because she **suspects** no one else will be. Her solitude is her most **cherished** time. She longs for silence. Clearly this may say more about me than her. Although if she's come from a household as complicated as her's is likely to be, I might not be off the mark!

And if solitude is what she desires, it makes sense that her first response to Jesus' presence is to give him some **attitude**. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” Translation: “Oh, please, just go away!” But then things take a turn. As they speak, she finds that this person doesn't just want something from her as most people do, but that he truly **wants to engage her in things of ultimate importance**. There is water **for her** here as well.

It is the water that attracts my gaze now – streams of living water, gushing up to eternal life. There are myriad streams of living water in this book, in these stories, in the person of Jesus. But the water will not be ours to drink if we come at the text looking for what is **not here to find**. The single **facts** of the situation. What we really should think **about this woman**. What Jesus thought. Why she is really at the well at noon. The one and only interpretation of what happens, and what John was **really trying to get at** in this story. If we come to the scripture looking for journalistic factuality, to satisfy our own need to nail it down,

we will be disappointed. Rohr tells us that if Jesus was interested in clarity (and perhaps we should add the gospel writers here as well), he, they, were **not great communicators**. Think about how many stories Jesus tells and our response is “What?” But if we come to the scripture looking for **living water**, water that dances and changes and flows where it will, a stream will run toward your heart, ready to fill it.

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The image that comes to me now is of a group of people (imagine all of **us**) standing side by side at the shore awaiting a sunrise. When the sun comes up it sends a beam across the water, right to each one. We all experience the beam coming straight toward us, aiming right for our hearts. And it illumines whatever is there. Such is the Word of God in scripture. It is meant for all of us together and for each of us individually where and as we are. We cannot keep it just to and for ourselves for we only see its infinite depth and meaning when we share our beam with one another, what we see, what we know, what we’ve learned, and what grace we’ve received. And together we develop wider vision, deeper understanding, and a new set of eyes.

With this wider vision, I hear anew the last line of today’s scripture. It always sounded like a belittling comment made to the woman by her townspeople who meet Jesus because of her witness. “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.’” But today I hear it as a **recognition** that the word is available to each of us where we are, as we are. There is something for each of us here to add to the testimony of another. It is, after all, living water – moving,

swelling, reaching out for each one, from a God of Spirit bigger and more multi-faceted than any one of us can contain.

And so today, I can only offer you what I see with my new eyes, the light running toward my heart in this wide ocean of living water. Jesus was here as he was at the well, not to judge, not to tell us everything that he knew, but to **engage us in things of ultimate importance**, as he did with this woman. To engage us in God - with question, with story, with urgency and love. For if we do not choose to constantly engage in the infinite depths of God, we stop. We get stuck in judgment. We remain in ancient prejudices. We get enmeshed in roles and rules. And the water meant to flow freely to and out of ourselves throughout our lives dries up along with our spirit.

Sometime soon, when the weather gets better, let’s go down to the water for a sunrise. To experience that stream of light running straight to our hearts. And to realize the depth and breadth of the water around it. The word of God is like this. A constant flowing. A constant giving and receiving. A constant stream in a depth of meaning. Let’s do it, and together find the living water reaching up to eternal life!

