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## Living Water

As we move through the season of Lent this year, most of our stories are taken from the Gospel of John, and for the next few weeks, we will hear lengthy stories, whole chapters, of John's gospel read, as Karen did for us this morning.

We started with John's Gospel last week, with the relatively compact story of Nicodemus, a Jewish leader and teacher who came to Jesus by night. Today we had the much longer story of Jesus' encounter with a woman of Samaria at a well. Next week, we will hear the story of Jesus' healing of a man born blind; and the week after that, we will hear the story of Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead. So thank you, Karen; and thanks in advance to the readers for the next two weeks, for taking on such a big job!

So a series of stories, over a number of weeks, that taken together, advance the message of John's gospel.

That message is stated in the opening words of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in

him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

The message of the Gospel of John is that Jesus is God's Son, God Incarnate, the Light of the World, sent into the world because—as last week's reading reminded us—God so loved the world: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

The opening verses of John's gospel also set out the central problem that this gospel will explore: that while Jesus is God's Son, the Word made flesh, God incarnate, sent to live among us—the problem is that the world doesn't recognize who Jesus is.

So we have these stories of encounters that reveal who Jesus is. Last week with Nicodemus, and today with the woman at the well, Jesus is a teacher of the ways of God.

In the later stories, we'll see Jesus as a healer, a restorer of sight; and then as a lifegiver, someone with power over life and death.

Because of this pattern where the world doesn't recognize who Jesus is, the Gospel of John is full of dramatic

irony: things are often not as they seem to be. Words have multiple meanings, and conversation partners seem to talk past each other. Things often start out muddled and murky, with clarity only emerging slowly over time. We saw that with Nicodemus last week, with the language of being reborn.

We'll see a similar problem as we look more closely at today's story, the story of Jesus' encounter with this woman of Samaria. Because it's a long story, there is a lot here, and we can't deal with all of it. So I want to walk through the conversation between Jesus and the woman, and try to uncover what's happening here, in this conversation of multiple meanings and slowly emerging truth. You'll notice that there is a pattern of Jesus patiently working through a series of objections that the woman raises.

The conversation opens with Jesus asking for a drink of water. Jesus is tired from his journey; it's hot—it's about noon; he's sitting beside the well without a bucket. It's a natural question. Except that in the Gospel of John, water isn't just water and food isn't just food. So Jesus' request is really just a way of opening a portal to conversation with this woman.

But she knows the rules: that there are social and cultural barriers that mean that Jewish men and Samaritan women ought not to have a lot to do with one another. "You don't really want a drink from me, do you?" is her retort.

To which Jesus responds, "Well, actually no. This isn't about what you can do for me; it's about what I can do for you." And he promises her 'living water.' "How are you going to do that?" she asks. "You have no bucket and this well is deep. Are you greater than our ancient ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well we've been using all these centuries?" The conversation is widening out now from a concern with literal water to an exploration of who Jesus is: are you greater than our celebrated ancestor?

Jesus continues: "The water from this well is something you need to come back for every day. I can give you water that will never run out. Trust in me and you will not thirst."

This is a turning point. The woman of Samaria responds, "Yes please! Give me this water! Bring it on! Where do I sign up to get in on this?" She's heard enough to say, this is worth exploring, I want to know more.

Jesus says, "Alright, let's start with where you are. Go get your husband and come back." And she says, "Well...", and she gives the cagey reply, "I have no husband." Which is true, but it's only part of the truth. She's withholding information, perhaps because she fears she will be judged if the full truth of her life is known.

Jesus says what she is unwilling to say. "Look—I know your whole story. It's okay. I knew it before we started talking. My offer still stands." Jesus is giving the woman this

profound reassurance: “I know all about you, and my offer still stands. Living water; eternal life, for you.”

Jesus’ words convince the woman that she is in the presence of a prophet; she’s getting a clearer and clearer idea of his identity. He’s gone from being a Jewish man at the well, to someone a notch or two above the celebrated ancestor Jacob, to now being seen as a prophet, a man of God.

But she still has objections, and she raises some questions about the difference in religious practices between Samaritans and Jews. Jesus responds by saying, “The day is coming when that won’t matter anymore.” She says, “Yes, I know that one day the Messiah is coming, the Christ.”

Jesus says, “I am he. I am the Messiah, the Christ.” It’s the first of several times in John’s gospel when Jesus uses the phrase “I am.” In biblical terms, “I am” is a form of God’s name. It’s how God identifies himself to Moses. So here, and in other places in John’s gospel, Jesus is disclosing his divine identity.

That’s where the conversation ends, as the woman leaves behind her water jar, and goes off to evangelize, to share the good news with everyone in her town.

So what does this story tell us? Well, there are a number of things I could point to, but I thought I would take a page from John Burton’s example last week, and offer you my

testimony as to why I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, and my Saviour.

Like the woman at the well, I too have a past that I am reluctant to speak of. I grew up in poverty, in a very troubled family. The kinds of things that don’t set you up very well for adulthood. As a young adult, I made a series of poor choices, and wandered, lost in a kind of wilderness, with a lot of brokenness in my life.

Three of my siblings died young, overwhelmed by what life threw at them. But for the grace of God that might have been my path, too. But God sent people into my life, people who were a lot like Jesus in this story, meeting me where I was at, and inviting me into something more. People who loved me when I felt I was unloveable; people who treated like I was worth something when I didn’t believe that about myself. People for whom my checkered past was not a barrier to relationship.

Most of that didn’t come from the places it should have come from. It didn’t come from my biological family. It came from strangers. It came from outside, or above, or beyond, my life and my self. Despite all my objections, the love and radical acceptance of God poured into my life. I experienced it as a miracle. And I believe quite literally that God saved my life.

Eventually, God drew me into the relationship that has become the centre of my life, my relationship with my

husband Don. Don has been the single most important teacher in my life about what the love of God is like. Don has been a model for me of Christlike, generous acceptance and invitation.

Through our marriage, God called me into ministry. And God has continued to equip me for a life and a calling that is like nothing I imagined when I took my first tentative steps onto this path. Like the woman of Samaria, God was willing to work with little, still rather lost, me, and draw me deeper into relationship, into the way of Jesus. If you had known me twenty years ago, it would have been quite a stretch to imagine me here today. It's all miracle. It's all God's work, beyond what I could do myself.

This path that I've been on—that Don and I have been on together—continues to unfold, continues to reveal new things to us. Over time we've learned more and more about what God is like, and about what being disciples of Jesus means for our lives, how it reshapes our lives. Our Christian faith has turned out to be the greatest thing in our lives.

For me personally, it has saved my life. I have no doubt about that. So yes, living water that never runs out? A life beyond anything I could imagine? I know something about that, and I am eternally grateful for it.

I want to close with some words from Will Willimon:

“Who is a Christian? A Christian (at least on this Sunday with the Samaritan woman) is someone who is willing to be open to the possibility that something's afoot, that the risen Christ isn't only enigmatic but also revealing, that even though you may not have the time or the inclination to look for God, God in Jesus Christ just might be looking for you!

Tomorrow at work, when you take in hand a bucket, or a keyboard, a textbook, or a Bible, keep looking over your shoulder. Something's afoot. Be ready to be encountered.”

May it be so. Amen.

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