

Living Water from Unexpected Voices John 4:7–26, 39–42 | Isaiah 55:1–3

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)^[a] ¹⁰Jesus answered her, “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.” ¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir,^[b] you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵The woman said to him, “Sir,^[c] give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband,’ ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir,^[d] I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you^[e] say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you^[f] will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You^[g] worship what you^[h] do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he,^[i] the one who is speaking to you.”

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They 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.”

When was the last time someone surprised you by being wiser than you expected?

Maybe it was a child who suddenly spoke with clarity beyond their years.

Maybe it was someone you had quietly underestimated — someone whose voice you didn’t expect to carry insight or authority.

Maybe it was someone whose life experience was so different from yours that you almost missed the wisdom they were offering.

We all carry assumptions about who gets listened to. Who has authority. Who speaks with credibility.

And sometimes those assumptions run so deep we don’t even notice them. In the anti-racism world, we call that unconscious bias.

Today’s Gospel story invites us to reconsider who we think can speak about God — and perhaps it also invites us to reconsider how we listen to one another in a world that has forgotten how.

For generations, the church has told this story in a particular way.

The Samaritan woman becomes the immoral woman, the cautionary tale, the sinner exposed by Jesus.

Five husbands. Scandal. Shame.

But here is something remarkable: The text never calls her sinful.

Jesus never tells her to repent. He never condemns her. He never shames her.

Instead — he talks theology with her. And not briefly.

This is one of the longest recorded conversations Jesus has with anyone in the Gospel of John — longer than many exchanges with the disciples themselves.

So perhaps the question is not what is wrong with her. Perhaps the question is what we have been taught to assume about her.

Sometimes we inherit interpretations that say more about our fears than about the text itself.

In this story, the woman is unnamed.

And throughout scripture, unnamed women often stand at theological turning points: midwives who defy empire, women who recognize God's work before others do, voices that redirect the story of salvation itself.

Their names were not always preserved — not because they lacked importance — but because the biblical writers lived within patriarchal cultures where women's stories were not given the same care.

And if we are honest, the church is still learning in this area.

We inherit a faithful tradition — and we also remain shaped by institutions that sometimes struggle to recognize every voice equally.

So when we encounter this unnamed woman, we should slow down and ask:

What wisdom might we have missed because we were not taught to expect it from her?

Notice what actually happens in the text.

She questions Jesus.

She challenges him.

She raises deep theological questions about worship, history, and religious identity.

These are not shallow exchanges. This is theological dialogue.

And Jesus responds seriously.

He entrusts her with one of the most profound revelations in John's Gospel: "I who speak to you am he."

The Messiah reveals himself first — not to religious authorities, not to insiders — but to a Samaritan woman at a well.

Not a sinner corrected but a marginalized theologian recognized.

Womanist scholars encourage us to read scripture by asking whose voices have been minimized by tradition — and what new gospel we hear when those voices are restored to the center.

And suddenly this story sounds very different.

We are often told she comes to the well at noon because she is ashamed. But the Gospel never says that.

In John's Gospel, light matters.

Revelation happens in the open, in full visibility.

Noon is when shadows disappear. Nothing is hidden. Everything stands in the light.

Perhaps she comes at noon not because she is hiding — but because this is the hour when truth is revealed.

And listen again to Isaiah:

"Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... without money and without price."

The invitation comes before worthiness.

Before respectability.

Before anyone proves themselves deserving.

Jesus does not begin with judgment.

Grace does not begin with judgment.

Grace begins with need.

“Give me a drink.”

And maybe this is where the story meets us most honestly.

We live in a thirsty world.

Not thirsty for information — we have endless information.

But thirsty for meaning.

For belonging.

For rest.

For hope that lasts longer than headlines.

Isaiah asks:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?

I see this thirst all the time.

I was speaking recently with a colleague in ministry — someone deeply faithful, deeply committed — who said something that stayed with me.

They said, “I spend so much time helping other people find hope that sometimes I’m not sure where I go to find it myself.”

Nothing was outwardly wrong.

The church was functioning.

Programs were running.

People were showing up.

And yet underneath it all was a quiet exhaustion — a spiritual thirst that success itself could not satisfy.

Our culture is deeply hydrated technologically — and spiritually dehydrated.

And into that thirst, Jesus still says:

Living water.

We are living in a moment when voices compete constantly for our attention.

Every day we are told who to trust. Who to fear. Who is telling the truth.

Our national life feels loud — and exhausted at the same time. And the exhaustion we feel is not imagined.

According to the Pew Research Center, nearly three-quarters of Americans say recent national crises have driven the country more apart than together.

And in a recent Gallup poll, trust in mass media has fallen so low that roughly seven in ten Americans say they have little or no confidence in the news they receive.

We are surrounded by voices — and yet trust keeps shrinking.

Perhaps our deepest crisis right now is not disagreement — but distrust.

And into a world like that, this story speaks.

Jesus does something radically simple. He stops. He listens. He treats a person others had learned to categorize as a conversation partner worthy of revelation.

Not a problem to solve. Not a headline to interpret. A person to encounter.

And living water begins there.

And here is where the story becomes astonishing.

She leaves her water jar. She came carrying a container for survival. She leaves carrying a calling.

She goes back to her community and says simply: “Come and see.”

No credentials. No polished theology. Just testimony.

And the Gospel tells us: Many believed because of her word.

She becomes the first person in John's Gospel to lead others to faith through testimony — before Peter preaches, before the disciples fully understand.

God's living water flows through someone the world least expects.

And perhaps that has always been God's way.

Howard Thurman once wrote, "There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself."

Perhaps Jesus hears that genuine voice in her before anyone else does.

He sees not scandal — but truth. Not failure — but possibility.

Not shame — but calling.

And when someone is finally seen clearly, living water begins to flow.

By the end of the story, the people say, "We know this is truly the Savior of the world."

Not because an authority declared it. Because someone shared her story. Because living water flowed through her life into theirs.

The invitation Isaiah spoke still echoes. The invitation Jesus embodied still stands.

God's living water flows first — and often — through those the world least expects.

Through overlooked voices.

Through ordinary people who have encountered grace.

So come, all who thirst. Come to the waters.

And perhaps the good news is this: The living water of God is still flowing —and it may already be rising in voices we have not yet learned to hear. Amen.