

“The Sign in the Cistern”

Introduction: Jeremiah is the name of the prophet who wrote the longest book in the Bible (always good to know when playing trivia!). More importantly, he was known as the prophet of doom as well as the weeping prophet. This was so because Jeremiah was charged with the incredibly difficult and uncomfortable call of proclaiming God’s unhappiness with his people and the coming of the era of exile.

Chapter 2 summarizes it all quite simply with a couple of poignant metaphors: God’s people began their relationship with him like a young bride devoted to her husband. She followed him as he led the way through the wilderness to their new home. But then she strayed and began following worthless idols. Even her priests and her prophets rebelled against him. God summarized the problem in this way:

“Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror,” declares the LORD. “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” - Jer. 2:12-13

God is saying that we all worship something, we all pursue what we believe will bring us meaning and purpose, but much of what we pursue falls short; it doesn’t hold water. It leaks and doesn’t satisfy us like the living water of God himself.

With his background in mind, let’s hear Jesus have a conversation with a woman about water, and in the process, hear him lay out another clue to direct us to the treasure he is. As it will turn out, this woman’s cisterns are broken, and so she is still thirsty. Jesus desires to not only lead her, but also us as we eavesdrop, to the soul satisfying, living water that comes from him.

I. Conversing in Samaria

A. Jesus and his disciples were on the move. The Passover celebration in Jerusalem was over and they were heading back north, to the region of Galilee. The direct route would take the traveler through a territory called Samaria, which lay in the center of Palestine. It would have been like needing to go through Massachusetts on your way to New Hampshire from Connecticut. However, unlike MA, Samaria was not neutral territory, at least as far as a devout Jew was concerned. Why? Because in Samaria lived Samaritans, those who were the offspring of the intermarriage of Jews and Gentile foreigners. Not only did these offspring “taint” Jewish racial purity, but their worship was also a mix of Judaism and paganism. Centuries of racial and religious tension had resulted such that typically, a Jew would travel around Samaria, not through it.

B. But our text reveals that Jesus “*had* to go through Samaria.” This “*had*,” as it appears from time to time in the Bible, is often known as the “*divine necessity*,” meaning that in some way, Jesus was compelled by the Holy Spirit *not* to avoid these people but to interact with them. Evidently, and shockingly to a devout Jew, the Samaritans were included in those for whom Jesus had come. But they were not going to go anywhere near Jerusalem; Jesus was going to have to go to them.

As I thought about this, it took me back to part of the discussion at our congregational meeting last Sunday. And that was to note that an increasing percentage of people in recent years simply have no interest in entering a church to see what goes on here. Either they didn’t grow up in the church, so really have nothing to “go back to,” or, they’re not happy with what they’ve been reading about, or seeing in,

the Christians around them, so there's no attraction. They may be thirsty, but they're not looking for anything in the church to quench that thirst. Worth noticing, then, is that Jesus doesn't model a "come and get it" approach to those outside of the church. Instead, he employs a "go and meet them where they are" strategy. In this instance case, to sit down at a well—an ancient day coffee shop—and engage in a conversation with one of its customers.

## II. Conversing with the Woman

A. Who was this woman that Jesus asked for a drink of water? In addition to being a Samaritan, we read that she had come to the well at noon. This means that she had come in the heat of the day, rather than early in the morning or later in the afternoon, as was customary. And this probably meant that she was trying to avoid her neighbors, who likely didn't think too highly of her, given her rather questionable lifestyle. That, we learn, included having gone through five husbands, and now living outside of marriage with a sixth. Not only, it seems, had men used her, but her current lifestyle choice rendered her a social outcast. At the same time, equally as shocking in this encounter was the fact that Jesus was willing to converse, alone, with a woman, something a devout Jew never would have done in order to protect himself from both temptation, as well as gossip. It's why his disciples were so shocked when they returned with lunch and found him in conversation with her.

B. And yet, here was Jesus, engaged in conversation, crossing all sorts of boundaries to reveal to this woman the opportunity for a fresh start and a new life, grounded in a new kind of satisfaction. Now, if we think back to last week, and the encounter Jesus had with Nicodemus, this customer at the well couldn't have been more different. He is a man, she is a woman. He is a Jew, she is a Samaritan. He is named, she is not. He is highly moral, she borders on the immoral. He is educated, she is not. He is rich, she is poor. He is powerful, she is powerless. He is respected, she is shunned. He sought meaning and purpose in the arms of religion, she in the arms of a man. There couldn't have been two more opposite people, but both needed Jesus and the new birth and living water of the Spirit. Like John, in chapter two, locates Jesus both at a private wedding in the small town of Cana, and at a public festival in the large city of Jerusalem, cluing us into the fact that Jesus has come to work in all types of places, so here John seems to want us to see that Jesus has come to extend his grace to all kinds of people.

C. Significantly, Jesus didn't begin by scolding this woman. He began by sharing in her weariness and affirming her by asking her to use what she had to help him. He then used that to share the possibility of the thirst-quenching satisfaction he had come to offer. Then, and only then, did he address her current lifestyle. And he did so, not to be mean, but to help open her eyes to the brokenness that had filled her life and the way she had kept "going back to the well," looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places. Jesus simply knows that her thirst cannot really be satisfied by him until she names what she's been pursuing that keeps leaving her thirsty.

This encounter prompts us to ask: To what do we turn that we think will satisfy our thirst, our longing for meaning and purpose? What cisterns might we be digging that won't hold the refreshment we need? Generally, we "dig" in two major categories: possessions and/or performance. Possessions can run the gamut from what we've been able to accumulate or purchase, to relationships we've entered. Like this woman, we can believe that if we just have the right stuff, or are loved by the right person, we'll be happy and content. These things may satisfy for awhile, but they are imperfect and will never really provide the living water we need. Performance provides the same limit. If we think we'll find satisfaction by what we do or accomplish, that may build us up for awhile, but eventually it will let us down as we'll

learn that we always make mistakes, we might even fail, and we can always do better. Only Jesus loves us the way we need to be loved, even when, and especially when, we fail and don't deserve it. To experience this, we need to begin, as Jesus was asking this woman, by acknowledging we've been looking elsewhere.

### III. Conversing with her Neighbors

A. Now, of course, she didn't acknowledge all of that immediately. She did what we're all inclined to do – she bobbed and weaved and danced, trying to distract Jesus with a theological conversation, raising an old argument between Jews and Samaritans about where worship should take place. “We worship here, you all worship there...it's all such a muddle. No one really knows. It's all about just being a good person, right?” Jesus answers by trying to point out that it's more about who you worship than where, but she isn't really listening. When he's done, she plays what she hopes will be the winning card: “There's this fellow called Messiah who will come one day and clear everything up. Until then, I'll just go on living as seems best.”

B. And then Jesus blows her away by saying, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” Suddenly, her life turns upside down. If this fellow, who had just sat down with her, crossing every social and religious boundary, could be the Messiah, then how incredible and soul-satisfying his love might be for her. Maybe, just maybe, he could satisfy her thirst beyond anything or anyone she had ever known.

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him. – 4:28-30

Notice she's no longer worried about her water jar, or even what her neighbors think of her. Instead of trying to hide from them, she couldn't wait to invite them, “come and see,” to experience what she had experienced. While she didn't have all the theology worked out, while she didn't know that this living water had a name – the Holy Spirit (Jn. 7:37-38) – she was coming to know a refreshment she had never known before, and couldn't help but share.

Jesus invites us to identify the tepid, stale water which we are drinking, to name the ways we might be relying on possessions or performance to achieve satisfaction, and to drink deeply instead from the spring of living water that is his Spirit who reveals the depth of God's amazing love for us. His promise is that we will be filled with a love that is better than life, which, like it did for this woman, becomes so overflowing that we just can't keep it to ourselves!