

## **Water Always Wins**

Psalm 95  
John 4:5-30

Be careful what you ask for. Last week, I said I enjoy it when you ask me about something I have preached. Well, in last week's sermon I mentioned that in colonial times some men drank a barrel of whiskey every two weeks. One of you approached me after worship and said, "That whiskey thing is impossible. I did the math and that would take 344 shots a day." I agreed that *was* impossible. Then we speculated on the size of the barrel as a possible explanation. It turns out that barrels then and now come in various sizes, ranging from five to 259 gallons. The barrel in two weeks thing came from a sidebar in an issue of Discover Magazine published some time in 2022. But I tore the page out of the issue and sat it on my desk for some time before using it, then recycled it after I wrote the sermon. I searched their website and failed to find it. So I do not know how to verify this story. I say this now because I want you to know how seriously I take documenting things in my sermons.

At the time those colonists were drinking whiskey—however much they did—sailing ships used sherry butts, 129 gallon barrels, to store fresh water. Each filled barrel would have weighed over 1,000 pounds. Accordingly, the captain and his master would have calculated very carefully exactly where to store each one. The ship's trim, its balance and cant, was controlled largely by that water. They also

fastened them down with stout ropes. If they got loose during a storm they could damage the hull and kill men. According to the website Phrases.com, this could be the origin of the phrase “water always wins”.

But the preferred explanation for “water always wins” is the fact that over time water can rust, corrode or otherwise damage even the mightiest of structures. They paint bridges over saltwater as frequently as they can afford to because if they did not, eventually that saltwater would crumble even steel. Ghost Ranch, in the arid Sangre de Cristo Mountains of northern New Mexico, has arroyos, deep stream courses that have no water in them—except when it rains. The average annual rainfall there is a scant ten inches, but in most years it comes all at once during August. When that happens those arroyos fill with powerful, rushing water. Wisely, the Ranch has built no arroyo crossings, even when they might save pedestrians a detour of several minutes. Nor have they built anything at all where an arroyo might spread, as they do change course during especially heavy storms. Water always wins.

And yet we need water. Our lives literally depend on it. That is why the Samaritan woman came to the well in Sychar at noon. She had to have water, but apparently she could not get it in the evening, when all the other women gathered to talk and draw the water their families required for the next twenty-four hours. Sychar was an over-grown small town. Those other women would have known all about her unconventional living arrangements. Five ex-husbands and living with a sixth man did not play well then and there. Fresh from his encounter with the “ruler of the Jews”

Nicodemus, in which he has spoken his most famous line (“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”), Jesus now meets another outlier, the Samaritan woman drawing water from the well in the heat of the day.

Jesus asks the woman for a drink. Even to speak to her violates Jewish customs. She is a Samaritan and as John tells us, “Jews do not share things with Samaritans.” Of equal or greater importance, she is a she. She is a woman. He is a rabbi. They are alone, together. They are out in the most public place in the entire town. When she asks, “How is it that you, a Jew, asks a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” water has nothing to do with it. It has to do, rather with the customs and laws about male/female interaction. Neginah Mohseni, the wife and mother of the Afghan family whose case I managed, took to calling me her “Indiana Dad”. We spent hours, just the two of us, traveling to her medical appointments in Bloomington and Indianapolis. I carried her younger children around on my shoulders. If I stayed away from their home for too many days she or her husband would invite me to visit. I felt great affection, and had tremendous respect, for her. But when we said goodbye for the last time she gave me what I call the Salaam Salute, her right hand on her left collar bone. Then she shook my hand. It was *unthinkable* that she, a devout Muslim woman, would give me a hug or anything else we might consider appropriate. I understood, but I would have responded in kind to any gesture she chose.

Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he has the power to give her “living water”. Once she drinks it she will never again thirst. She observes he has no bucket.

She questions whether he thinks he is greater than the Patriarch Jacob, at whose well they sit. He tells her his water produces eternal life. She does ask for it, but clearly does not yet understand he is not talking about H<sub>2</sub>O. He asks her to fetch her husband. She says she has no husband. He gives her the history of her marital life. She tells him, "I see that you are a prophet." Since the Samaritans believed that only the first five books of the Bible are God-inspired this comment has added significance. They did not think Isaiah, Jeremiah and the written prophets in our Bibles were actually prophets. So this is high praise. She is awakening to his identity.

Still, she tries to deflect him into a theological argument. The Samaritans and the Jews disagree on where and how to worship God. Since he is a prophet can he clarify it for her? He explains that everything has changed with his appearance. The hour has come when people will worship "in spirit and truth". They can worship any time, any place, and they will worship God, who "is spirit". And he is about to reveal that God, the Spirit and He are all one and the same. The woman says she knows "that Messiah is coming". Belief in the Messiah was widespread in Samaria but not, apparently, predicated on scripture. New Testament scholar Daniel Migliore has written that the Samaritans' faith in a Messiah relied on oral traditions passed along through the generations. We make this point in order to stress just how large was the divide between the Jews and the Samaritans—and just how odd this man and woman having this conversation truly was.

The most important moment in that conversation comes next. When the

Samaritan woman reveals she knows “Messiah is coming,” Jesus says, “I am he, the one speaking to you.” The Greek text omits “he”, making his statement, “I am, the one speaking to you.” This reminds us of the Jews' name for God, Yahweh, which lacks a precise English translation. The closest rendering is “I am, that I am”. God exists. God is. “I am”. Jesus is God. He certainly understood things that way. He comes right out and says so in this strange little encounter.

The disciples return from a grocery run. Though John tells us, “They were astonished he was speaking with a woman,” none of them dares question him. The woman finds people to tell about her encounter with Jesus. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” she says, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Oh yes, he can, we know with the benefit of the witness of John and the other three Gospel writers. Later in chapter four, John will record that Jesus will stay among the Samaritans for two more days, speaking to them of we know not exactly what. Yet, “many more believed because of his words.” They explicitly call him “the Savior of the world.” What started as a water break culminates in the conversion of many former antagonists into followers of Jesus. Water wins again.

That the Samaritans could convert should come to us as very good news, indeed. For we have greater differences with New Testament Jewry than they ever did. They all spoke Aramaic. Their religions came from the same root and most of their disagreements had to do with the location and functions of the shrines at which they worshiped. Yes, they had by Jesus' day experienced a few hundred years' worth

of tension. But what do we have in common with, say, Jesus' disciples? Faith in him as the Messiah just about exhausts the list. We speak and think differently. We have wildly divergent cultural norms. Yet we do believe in the one god, Creator, Son and Spirit. And some things we say over water illustrate our commonality.

I quote from the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship in its baptism liturgy: “We give you thanks, Eternal God, for you nourish and sustain all living things by the gift of water. In the beginning of time, your Spirit moved over the watery chaos, calling forth order and life.” This reference points to Genesis, a part of the Bible the Samaritans held sacred. Our liturgy goes on to mention Noah and then, “You led Israel out of slavery, through the waters of the sea, into the freedom of the Promised Land.” The Exodus and, again, the Samaritans also subscribed to this miracle. And of course, in the Presbyterian Church we always baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman about these faces of God and claimed to be of one substance with all three.

If the Samaritans of Sychar could bridge the gap they felt separated them from the Jews in order to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, so can we. Whatever doubts, whatever fears, whatever bad habits may push you away from God, in the waters of baptism we remind ourselves that we already belong to God, body and soul. And we can find life-giving nourishment in those waters, which in truth do keep us from ever having to thirst again. Water always wins. Don't fight it, drink it.