



## SUNDAY SERMON

# God Stories

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*The Gospel according to John, chapter 4, verses 5 to 42.*

*Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The 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.) Jesus 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."*

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### DATE

The Third Sunday in Lent  
Sun., Mar. 19, 2017

### PREACHER

The Rev. Dr. Kate Heichler

### READINGS

Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 95  
Romans 5:1-11  
John 4:5-42

*Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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."*

When I was in my early twenties, my parents were living in Turkey, and one summer I spent two months there. It is a beautiful country and I did a lot of traveling and sight-seeing—on the Aegean coast, the Mediterranean coast, inland ... One day my parents and I drove up the Black Sea coast, and after touring ancient monasteries, we decided we wanted some beach time. We looked at a few beaches, and finally settled on a gorgeous spot we could have to ourselves. Just as we settled in, a group of Turkish soldiers arrived and set up some distance away. I was an awkward 22-year-old, and didn't really want to meet a bunch of strange men.

They got a fire going, and a lot of food out of their bags and started to make lunch. And then one of them came over to us. "Don't talk to them," I thought ... The young man who approached spoke a little English, and my dad had a little Turkish, and it transpired that they wanted us to join them for lunch. We said, "No thank you" a few times – but it's impossible to resist Turkish hospitality. My parents got up, and I really had to join them to sit awkwardly with a group of men with whom I could not communicate. In a bathing suit.

Cross cultural encounters, full of tension – and possibility. We heard about one today. A man sits by a well, tired from his journey. A woman approaches, carrying a water jug. She is not happy to see she has company for this daily errand. She wants to be alone. Maybe he does too. It's high noon. If this were a western, a tumbleweed might blow across the scene, the rattle of a snake signal that Something Is About To Happen. Is it an accident that John tells us this story takes place at noon, when the light is greatest, no shadows in which to hide? Noon is when things are brought to light, might come to a head.

And here are our two antagonists – a weary preacher and a woman with a past. The way they step and side-step around each other makes for compelling theatre. And they give us a story in which each one of us can find ourselves. Theirs is a story we can repeat again and again, making it new each time. For God is always inviting us to cross boundaries of "other-ness" to enter into relationship with the stranger – and perhaps to become friends in Christ. Jesus and this Samaritan woman had to reach across many, many barriers, barriers of gender, ethnicity, religion, temperament, history. The very first thing the woman says to Jesus is about gender and race: "How is that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman, and a Samaritan?" And like many people talking across barriers, their conversation is strained. They keep talking past each other, not quite answering questions, changing the subject. The woman is sarcastic, "How you going to get this water? This well is deep, and you have no bucket, sir." And Jesus matches her, "Go and call your husband. – yeah, you're right, you have no husband, and the guy you're with now is not your husband." She abruptly changes the subject again to religious differences between them – His people say everyone has to worship in Jerusalem; hers recognize the holiness of the old sacred places like this well. When she can no longer counter Jesus' arguments, she resorts to a "wait till father gets home" move – "I know that when messiah comes, he will explain it all." And Jesus springs the trap: "Here he is. I'm the one you were waiting for."

And she does not laugh. She does not argue. She drops the sarcasm. She drops her bucket and runs back to town without the water she came for ... But with the living water Jesus had promised. Once she'd had that encounter in which she found herself known and not condemned, and realized that just maybe she'd met the Messiah, she had to tell her story. She dropped that bucket – the reason she'd walked all the way out to that well in the noonday sun – and ran back to town, back to the people she may have been trying to avoid, who judged and slut-shamed her, and told them straight out, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did!" No shame anymore, just confidence and awe.

And they do come and see, and ask Jesus to stay a few days – which required him and his disciples to clamber over a few more cultural barriers – and after that they have their own God-stories to tell. Now they believe for themselves. And they told that story enough that the writer of John heard it and passed on to us.

In Stamford, I did a monthly eucharist at a nursing home. One time I told this story. After I finished my little homily, a Latino woman asked if she could say something. Rosie often commented after my homilies, conveying my point better and more eloquently than I did! I don't know what her disability was, but she was semi-reclined in a wheelchair. She looked to me to be in her mid-40s. She was radiant, always smiling, thanking. I had spoken about the living water of Christ always within us, and she said, "I know about that living water. Before I knew Jesus I had this emptiness inside me, nothing could fill it. But the moment I learned about him and said yes to faith, I felt full. Now I always feel full of God, all the time, no matter what." Rosie's "no matter what" was a very challenging one, confined to a wheelchair, living in a nursing home. I'm sure she had different plans for her life.

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But her joy was palpable. That living water of Holy Spirit life truly gushed up in her and made her very focused on other people, on spreading her joy and peace. She could not not talk about Jesus.

Many of us, on the other hand, have gotten rather good at not talking about Jesus. I like to joke that Episcopalians think we're in the witness protection program, hiding our identities as passionate lovers of Jesus. We love to quote an apocryphal line attributed to St. Francis – preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words – as though that gets us off the hook of ever using words.

Yet part of being a follower of Christ is telling others, sharing our joy, naturally. Releasing our joy, like Rosie, like that Samaritan woman. I heard a story of a man who knew a lot about Christianity, even went to church and prayed, but refused to call himself a Christian. One day a priest asked him why and he said, "You know, I buy the whole thing. I believe Jesus is the son of God. But I don't want to have to talk about it, and Christians have to talk about their faith."

"You don't have to talk about it," said the priest.

"Wait, I can be a Christian and not tell anyone?"

"Absolutely."

"Alright then, I'm in. What do I do?"

The priest and the man prayed together, and he accepted Jesus as his savior. And he went home, and burst into his kitchen, where his family was gathered, and said, "You know what? I just found out I can be a Christian and not tell anyone!"

Can we be Christians and never say a word? Do we need to talk about our faith? Many think of evangelism as being able to reason people into believing what we believe, making sense of a God who allows pain and disaster; explaining the Nicene Creed. But what if we stayed away from belief and saw it on the level of experience? What if we stayed on the level of God-story? Our experiences with God? Introducing people to the Jesus of the Gospels, whom we experience in different ways in our own life? My favorite definition of evangelism comes from a professor at Virginia Theological Seminary, David Gortner:

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We have stories to tell, my friends. We have stories of a God who sent his son across the biggest boundary of difference there is, into an alien culture, an alien people, to love them out of estrangement into relationship, out of death into life. Somewhere, sometime, somehow we had an encounter with that man, and experienced love – or we've seen it in another, and want it for ourselves. Almost any time I've asked a group of people who's had an encounter with God in the past week, someone has a story to tell – an answer to prayer; a nudge they felt to call someone at just the right time; a holy moment.

Those are stories people around us need to hear! We are surrounded by people, many of whom have more to drink than they need, and are bone-dry-thirsty for the Living Water we have, like those Israelites with Moses in the Wilderness of Sin. The way we share our water is through our God stories, introducing Jesus the way we've come to know him. Which means we have to come to know him!

Who around you is dying of thirst? Who is searching for meaning, for purpose, for connection, for true love – the kind of love that allows you to be real, to be seen, with all your flaws and all your history, and still be loved? Still be worthy?

That day on the beach in Turkey, as I was dying a thousand deaths of cross-cultural embarrassment, I watched those soldiers prepare a feast – cutting up cucumbers into a salad, slicing loaves of steaming *ekmek*, Turkish bread, roasting skewers of ground lamb on the fire they'd made. We tried to tell them we'd already had lunch, but in the end we had to accept their feast – and I can tell you, I've never had finer food. And that has become one of my God stories, in my library of God stories that I know and can draw on when someone needs to know about this Jesus I worship, this Jesus who made feasts on beaches, in fields, on the road and at tables with the wrong sort of people. It even has a title in my mental library – "God's Feasts."

What stories are in your library? Who needs to hear them? We are recipients of that Living Water, just as Rosie knew she was. We are called to be aquifers, aqueducts, water-bearers, bringing that delicious, refreshing life to the thirsty.

Amen.