

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

March 12, 2023 – LENT 3, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Drink Deeply from the Only Source*”

Old Testament	Exodus 17:1-7	(God provides water in the desert for the Israelites)
Psalter	Psalms 95	(Shout to the Lord, the rock of our salvation)
Epistle	Romans 5:1-11	(We are made right with God through faith)
Gospel	St. John 4:5-42	(Jesus offers the Samaritan woman Living Water)

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Today’s Gospel story takes place in Samaria, the capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel—Judah had been the southern Kingdom since around 800 BC. Over time, the Samaritans had become a group distinct from the Jewish people, and modern genetic research shows they were descended from both Jews and Assyrians. The Samaritans practiced a religion closely related to Judaism, although it was not considered part of it. Sort of like Mormonism, which incorporates some Christian scriptures, but is not considered Christianity. Like the Jews, the Samaritans’ holy book was the Torah—that’s the first five books of *our* Bible, too—and they built their temple on Mount Gerazim in the mid-fifth century BC. Although the temple was destroyed in late 110 BC, the descendants of the original Samaritans still worshiped among its ruins.<sup>1</sup>

So, back to Samaria, the Samaritan woman’s turf, where she’s the one who’s at home. In this place, it’s Jesus who is the outsider—rather conspicuously and deliberately.

As 21<sup>st</sup>- century Christians, we’re beginning to understand what it’s like to be the outsiders, as we live in what is effectively a post-Christian society. In times of drastically declining church attendance, particularly in Britain (only 5 percent!), Western Europe, and the U.S.—where now, only 22 percent of Americans attend church weekly<sup>2</sup>—we might be tempted to retreat into a bunker-like mentality. However, Jesus calls us to engage with our culture, and connect with the people who need Him most.

Let’s look at how Our Lord responded to the challenge of engaging with a society in which He was the outsider. The setting of the story is a public well. Everyone who lived in the Middle East knew the importance of water, and shortages of clean, drinkable water are still a problem in much of the world today. The human body can go for weeks without food. But without water, we die in a matter of days. Water is essential to all life. And yet, vital as it is, Jesus offers the Samaritan woman water she cannot taste—“living water” that will bring refreshment not for that day, but for eternity.

In a world that is thirsting desperately for goodness, hope, and peace, Jesus offers the living waters of His presence, love, and forgiveness. Through His grace, He brings the truth that changes us forever, giving all who seek Him a gift we can neither merit nor earn—the gift of salvation and of eternal life in the presence of God, and of all the angels and saints. Christ calls us to share that grace with others, just as He did with the woman at the well.

You see, not only was she a woman openly living in sin, but the antagonism between Jews and Samaritans was longstanding. In fact, according to Jewish law, contact between Jews and Samaritans was strictly forbidden. They simply *did not* speak to one another. And in Jesus’ culture, a male rabbi risked ritual uncleanness and social ostracism by talking to an unrelated woman in public, whether she was a Jew *or* a Samaritan.

But Jesus is so filled with love and compassion for all who do not know Him that He shows no concern for the cultural, moral, or religious taboos of His day. He asks the woman for a drink of water, something no Jew would accept from a Samaritan; they were considered unclean and unholy, as was anything they touched. Instead of shunning her, Jesus honors this used and abused woman by encouraging a conversation with her.

In fact, Jesus had a habit of conferring dignity on all who were used and abused. In Luke 7:36-50, at the dinner party of Simon the Pharisee, a “lady of the night” gate-crashes the meal, kneels at Jesus’ feet, washes them with her tears of repentance, and dries them with her hair. The guests are aghast. She is worse than a nobody to everyone else, but to Jesus she is a person dearly beloved by God. The Samaritan woman, too, senses the warmth and kindness in Our Lord’s voice, and this encourages her to ask questions.

He goes on to talk about the life-giving water that flows through our entire existence when we believe He is the Christ. She does not fully understand His words, but in her heart, she knows He understands everything about her.<sup>3</sup> And His comprehension without condemnation is what convinces her that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Messiah, God’s anointed One who was promised by the prophets.

Today’s Gospel reminded me of a story about five American soldiers fighting in France in World War II. They had become close friends and constantly watched each others’ backs. But one of the five was killed in action, and so the remaining four gathered his remains and took them to a nearby village church to bury him. They asked the priest if they could bury their friend in the graveyard. The priest inquired, “Was he a Catholic?” “No,” was their reply. “Then,” said the priest, “you can’t bury him in the yard, but feel free to bury him beside the fence. I will make sure his grave is tended to.”

After the war ended, but before the four were shipped back to the U.S., they decided to visit their friend’s grave once more. They went back to the little village and searched beside the fence for his tomb, but they couldn’t find it. So they went to the rectory to ask the priest about their friend’s grave. The priest told them: “After you buried your fallen friend, it just didn’t seem right to me that he should be interred outside the fence.” “Oh, so, you moved the grave?” the men asked. “No,” the priest answered, “I moved the fence.”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus teaches His disciples that no one is outside the boundaries of God’s love. Samaritans—even Romans, Greeks, tax collectors, prostitutes, and thieves—in other words, everyone they would normally avoid, can be saved if they trust in Jesus and follow Him.<sup>4</sup>

Today’s Gospel challenges us to ask ourselves: Who are the people we prefer to avoid? The people we’d rather not talk to, or engage with too closely? The down-and-out food-stamp-users we see at Walmart? The Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons that ring our doorbells? That grouchy person you work with? Some goth-dressed kid with all the piercings that works at Turkey Hill? A relative who makes fun of your religion? Your neighbor who’s a drunk?

The late Rev. Dr. K. C. Ptomey, a Presbyterian seminary professor, wrote that as Jesus hung on the cross, “our Lord cried out, ‘I thirst’ (John 19:28). Jesus, of course, was in torment. Surely, he was physically thirsty. But [there is] also the suggestion ... that he hangs on the cross because he is thirsty for all of us who thirst for life, eternal life, real life, forgiven, cleansed, made whole, free-to-live-as-God-intends life .... God in Jesus Christ longs for a relationship with us, thirsts for us, and therefore reaches out, crosses barriers, defies prejudice, forgives sin, to get to us. Even hangs on a cross because he has such a passion for us.”<sup>5</sup> Thank God—no one, no matter how lost, or how depraved, is beyond the reach of Christ’s love.

Are you thirsty for more of Jesus? Drink deeply from the one and only Spring of Life: Christ’s love and mercy, especially as you receive His precious blood that saves us from our sins when you partake of the Eucharist. St. Irenaeus of Lyons (who died around 200 AD), wrote: “The Church is the fountain of living water that flows to us from the heart of Christ. Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and ... all grace.”

When, at the Eucharist, we lift up our hearts unto the Lord, it is an act of surrender. And in this giving up, and giving over, of ourselves, the reservoir of Living Water is opened, for grace to flow through us, body, mind, and spirit. Whether you’re waiting in line, going to sleep, kneeling at the altar, downloading at the computer, sharing drinks with a few friends, or walking the dog, lift up your hearts, lift them up to the Lord! For, as Fr. H. King Oehmig, an Episcopal priest and author, comments: “When the heart is centered on the world, it dries up. When it is lifted to the Lord, the waters of Baptism—chilly and cold—course through our veins, and ultimately flow out into a waterless, parched world. *Let them flow!*”<sup>6</sup>

### Let us pray:

Holy One, open our eyes to those around us who have been disappointed by everyone and abandoned in their questions. As Jesus offered living water to the woman at the well, may we extend cold cups of thirst-quenching love, caring relationship, and abundant provision to those who among us who so desperately need this. As we receive Your saving blood in the Eucharist today, may this gift strengthen and equip us to actively engage with those who are hungering and thirsting in body and spirit, longing to encounter You.<sup>7</sup>  
***Amen.***

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\* Adapt. N. George Hacker, "Drink Deeply from the Source," 27 March 2011, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> "Samaria," 27 February 2023, [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaria) < <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaria> > 3 March 2023.

<sup>2</sup> "How often do you attend church?" ©2023, [Statista](https://www.statista.com/statistics/245491/church-attendance-of-americans/) <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/245491/church-attendance-of-americans/>> 6 March 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Adapt., Paul Martin, *Synthesis, Year A: Lent 3*, p. 3

<sup>4</sup> Adapt., Vince Gerhardy, *Synthesis, Year A: Lent 3*, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> K.C. Ptomey, *Weavings* (July–August 2000), p. 34

<sup>6</sup> Adapt. H. King Oehmig, *Synthesis, Year A: Lent 3*, p. 4

<sup>7</sup> Adapt. "Honoring the Body: Worship, Music, Arts, and Story: Prayer from John 4:1–42," ©2012 [The Pilgrim Press](https://new.uccfiles.com/faith_practices/BodyWorship.pdf) <[https://new.uccfiles.com/faith\\_practices/BodyWorship.pdf](https://new.uccfiles.com/faith_practices/BodyWorship.pdf)> 6 March 2023.