

**Lent 3**  
**8/3/2026**

**Mark the Evangelist**

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

**Welling Up**

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

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The story of the woman at the well is timeless. It tells of a world of racial enemies and the myths that feed their prejudices against each other - pure tribalism. It tells of the political tensions between the genders. It tells of religious bigotry. It is really very modern. Our news broadcasts and newspaper editors feed us these things as a daily diet. We are all too familiar with what happens when one ethnic group moves in on the territory of another group. We know about indigenous people's resentment of invasion, and the colonists' resentment of their resentment. We know of stolen land and stolen children. We are told about the struggle of refugees and the resistance they find in the lands that they escape to. We know of the struggle of women to win equal status in society's structures. We know of the stigmatism that is dumped on people that do not conform in their societies. We know about the church taking a lashing from secular humanism. We know of the devastating conflict that can flow from fundamentalism in any religion – the religious justification of hate.

At another level it is timeless too. It tells of the weariness of travel (Jesus was tired out by his journey) and the grind of daily chores (give me this water so I won't need to come here to the well every day).

It is all strangely familiar and timeless, but it is also far enough away for us to have some questions about the details. What lay behind the antagonisms and prejudices of that time and place?

In the story of the woman at the well we are talking about open hostility between racial cousins. They avoided each other like the plague. The Jewish historian, Josephus, reveals that people of the Northern Kingdom who had not been carried off into exile permitted Alexander the Great to build them a temple on Mount Gerizim. When the southerners returned from exile, they rebuilt the Jerusalem temple and jealously regarded it as the only legitimate shrine for the worship of God. Josephus says that the Gerizim temple was destroyed in 128 BCE. According to the conversation between the woman and Jesus, the heart of their 150-year-old dispute lay in their love for their respective places of worship – a sentiment we can relate to.

It is typical of John's story-telling that there is more than one level of meaning. Often, he will insert a character who misunderstands what is going on. The account of Nicodemus visiting Jesus is an example of this. He couldn't understand Jesus' concept of being born again. The woman at the well is presented with two levels of meaning. She struggles to understand what Jesus is talking about. Jesus explains the mysteries for her and for us.

Let's unpack the story. The central symbolic motif is water. Jesus was thirsty and asked for water. The woman with the bucket raised all the human anomalies we have been remembering — how is it you, a Jewish man, ask water of me, a woman and a Samaritan – aren't you afraid of catching Samaritan girl germs.

Jesus' reply moved the discussion onto the new plain – if you knew who I am you would ask for water from me without any fear of catching Jewish boy germs, because what you would catch would well up in you into eternal life. The woman hasn't moved into this new plain of talk and just thinks Jesus was getting a bit above himself – do you think you are greater than Jacob who gave us this well?

Returning to Jesus' plain of debate the answer was that the problem with Jacob's well is that one drink doesn't quench all your thirst. It took a bit more toing and froing before both Jesus and the woman were relating on the same plain of conversation – but they get there because the woman started to connect what Jesus was saying with the things of God — might this man be the promised one, the Messiah?

A woman of Sychar in Samaria went to the well to find water. She met Jesus and got found out. 'Go and get your husband,' said Jesus. 'But I don't have a husband.' she replied. 'You have had 5 husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband.' replied Jesus. 'How did you know', she said. 'Are you a prophet?'

A woman went to find water and was found out by Jesus. She went to tell the people of her city. A prophet had found her. He had told her everything about herself. Could he be Messiah? Faith in Jesus had been kindled, and she had gone to tell others who came to see and came to faith themselves. As they said - they believed because of her testimony. Jesus stayed two days and many came to believe on the testimony of their own encounter with Jesus. The story ends with the Samaritans knowing that Jesus is the saviour of the world.

I would like to focus on two things that John's story is saying. The first is about how the Samaritans came to faith in Jesus. A particular point is made about how faith began by virtue of the woman telling the town about Jesus, but then they came to encounter Jesus for themselves.

I think we all know the best known of all children's hymns, *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so*. The editorial committee of AHB changed one word in this hymn. At number 166 reads *Jesus loves me, this I know, and the Bible tells me so*. I am sure this was done in recognition that faith in Jesus does not only come from third person testimony. God's love is revealed in Christ through the mystery of personal encounter by the power of the Spirit of God.

The second strong message of John's story is that Jesus is the point of reconciliation. At the feet of Jesus, old enemies and antagonists converge. They are still Jew and Samaritan, still male and female, but on the plain on which the discussion about living water was held, the old never-to-be reconciled found a common place, a unity.

There is a danger in just leaving that idea sit there. It is not enough to say that we find our unity in Christ. Being reconciled to God is a nonevent if there is no commitment to being reconciled to one another. I have divided the conversation Jesus had with the woman into two plains of meaning. The two plains must be connected. Spirit and flesh are part of the same realm. Those who are reconciled to Christ are committed to reconciliation among all for whom Christ died.

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