

## The Samaritan woman's story

John 4: 1-30, 39-42

Even when the sun is at its height you can't see down to the bottom of this well. It's deep. Dark. A circle of cold, dark nothingness.

Our ancestor Jacob's well. So they say. I wonder, did his wives and their maids draw water here, after they left Haran for an unknown future with their tricky master? Did they look down this well too, and wonder....

Wonder why the world is the way it is.

Wonder why it seems to be stacked against them.

It's the middle of the day. It's hot. Very hot. No-one in their right mind would choose this time of day to draw water.

But then – according to *them*, I'm not in my right mind. I'm not really interested in homes and husbands and babies. I'm interested in ideas. I want to explore things, think about things, talk about things.

Especially about God. This mysterious God who spoke to our ancestor Jacob, and his father and his father before him. This awesome God who spoke with Joseph during his time in Egypt. This powerful God who spoke through our ancestor Moses so he led the people to freedom in this Promised Land.

This God.

But God is man's work, and homes and husbands and babies are women's work. So I am not in my right mind. Five men have been sure they could beat it out of me. Another is trying. I don't suppose he will succeed either. I am who God made me to be, and I'm not planning to change.

And that means I'm not everyone's cup of tea. Or anyone's really.

Do you want to know how I know? About the well I mean. About the deep. About the cold, dark nothingness. Because it's compelling. It speaks of endings.

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And that's what I was thinking that day. When I saw him. I was bitter and cynical. Despairing and defiant.

And I really wasn't in the mood for another supercilious Jewish man looking down on me because a) I'm a Samaritan and b) I'm a Samaritan woman. Eughh!! To be honest if they

think they are so much better than us then why don't they just go the long way round and leave us in peace?

I ignored him. At least he was on his own, so no comments to his mates.

He spoke to me. Asked for a drink. Polite, he was, but.....I'd been there before. What was he after? I gave him the brush off.

But he kept going. And here's the thing. It was like he knew me. Knew what I was almost literally dying to hear. He spoke of God. But not in a way I'd ever heard before. He spoke of flowing, sparkling, living water. Like streams in the sunshine on the uplands. Refreshing and joy-bringing. Living water turning into springs of water welling up to eternal life. My heart and my soul fluttered with joy and hope.

Not that I let on, mind. I was – yes, thirsty - for more, but there was no way I was going to show him that.

And then – the most amazing thing. Somehow, he did know me. He knew about the failed marriages, and why I was there alone in the heat of the day. He knew – and yet he did not judge or condemn. Did not turn away in disgust. Just waited for me to speak.

And finally I looked at him. He was clearly a man of God. I told him so. And yet here he was - talking to me. To ME! About God, and worship, and other things that prophets speak of to their disciples. As if I too were one. He spoke of a new time to come, when the differences in the ways Samaritans and Jews worship God – the things which divide us - would disappear.

“God is spirit.....worship in spirit and in truth,” he said.

I'd never heard such a thing before. What could it mean?

And then the ideas began to unfurl themselves in my mind

God is spirit. God is not just some ancient story. God is real. Alive. What is spirit if it is not alive? Jacob and his wives and their maids and the others – they knew this God. He was here, at this well, with them. Could this mean that I....?

As soon as the thought came, it felt as if I'd known it forever. We can know God. All my life, that's what I'd been doing. Searching to know the one true God.

Had I spent my whole life searching for God, only to find that actually he was searching for me?

I looked sideways at the man. Who was he, that he made God feel so close?

What else had he said?

“Worship in spirit...” well, yes – I get that. How do we worship a living God? With our lives. Our whole selves. All the time. Not just at some ritual on the mountain here or in Jerusalem.

And “worship in truth” .... Worship in a way which honours the truth of who God is – Lord and Father.

Father? Yes, he’d definitely said Father. Not just a distant and imperious God, but one who watches over, and cares and provides. But wait. When he had said Father, there had been more. A deep intimacy. I longed to be part of it.

Trembling with hope, I said, “I know that Messiah is coming.... He will explain everything to us.”

Really, I knew. I just wanted to hear him say it. “I who speak to you am he.”

And somehow I dared to look into his eyes. They were deep. Deep and dark. Like the well. But instead of cold, dark nothingness, his eyes contained life and light and living water, and the warmth of a love that I had never encountered before.

The depth of the well offered a cold, dark speaking of endings. His depth of his eyes offered a sparkling speaking of beginnings. Spoke of new Life.

I wanted to fall down and worship him there and then, but something stopped me. There was something else I needed to do. Right then, I ran into the village and it all tumbled out. “come and see....”

Did I doubt that once again they wouldn’t listen? I can’t honestly remember.

But they did. Something miraculous happened and they did. They came and they saw, and they too believed.

And he stayed for two glorious, wonderful days, and I sat at his feet as he spoke. As a disciple.

Of course, I wanted to go with him when he left, but in my spirit I knew that Sychar was where I was meant to be. And as his ministry grew and he became more well known I heard many things about him from the travellers who passed through our town. About his teaching, and the healings. About the followers and the opposers. About the religious authorities circling like crows.

The day I heard that he was dead was the worst day of my life.

And then the stories began of how he was alive again. Was I surprised? Not really. Had he not spoken to me of a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Had I not seen that Life with my own eyes? It had not looked as if mere death could defeat it. Could death defeat the Son of the Living God?

And then they said he had returned to his Father, and brought stories of the amazing events at Pentecost. Tongues of fire. Living water. Breath of Life. I recognised it all. The Spirit of God, who had touched me that day, and who lived in me still.

And then came the persecution and the Jerusalem believers were scattered – and the Way of the Messiah came to Samaria. Just as he had said. Some stayed. Some moved on. And one day I met a young man called John, and told him my story.

They came, and we met. We followers of Jesus. Whatever our background, our race, our status, our gender. Every follower. We welcomed them and we worshipped together.

In spirit and in truth.