THE STRANGER AT THE WELL

INSPIRED BY JOHN 4:3-42

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From Jacob’s well outside of Sychar there is a beautiful view of Mt. Gerizim—the mountain on which God proclaimed a blessing in Deuteronomy 11, and on which my people, the Samaritans, worshipped Jehovah in ages past, and long to do so again. Both Jacob and his father Isaac met their wives at wells, so I’d always known that wells could be a significant meeting place. But I never dreamed that a conversation with a stranger at the well of Jacob would change my life, and the lives of many others in my town.

The history of my people goes back many centuries. We’ve lived here, in the land Jacob gave to his son Joseph, ever since Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel seven hundred years ago and deported most of the Israelite people to Assyria and Mesopotamia. At that time, the Assyrians who had escaped deportation and moved into this land to live among the Israelites wanted to know about the God of the Hebrews. An Israelite priest was returned from exile to teach the newcomers how to worship Jehovah. Over time the remaining Israelites intermarried with the Assyrians, and their descendants became known as Samaritans. Since those days we have come to view ourselves, rather than the Jews who’d remained in the southern kingdom of Judea, as the true preservers of the Torah. For us, passages from the book of Deuteronomy—like the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the promise of a Messiah who would be a prophet like Moses—are central to our faith.

Relations between us Samaritans and the Jews are rather strained, to say the least. About six hundred years ago, we offered to help the Jews rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, and to worship with them. They refused our offer, calling us “half-breeds” and saying that we were “ritually unclean from birth,” and that they would never worship with us. I’m sad to say that there has been recurrent violence and acts of vandalism between our two races ever since. About four hundred years ago we were allowed by the ruler at the time, Alexander the Great, to build our own temple on the peak of Mount Gerizim, and to rebuild the city of Shechem at its base. It was a beautiful temple, and it rivaled Jerusalem as a sanctuary for Jehovah for more than two centuries. Then, about a hundred years ago, a Jewish king who had an especially strong hatred for my people sent Jewish forces to Mount Gerizim. They destroyed both the temple and the city of Shechem, which had 10,000 people living in it. Now, only our little town, Sychar, remains on this site. Every day of my life until this day, I looked up at Mount Gerizim, and wondered when Jehovah would fulfill again his promise of blessing on it, and on us. I wondered when he would send his Messiah.

The day I met the stranger started out like any other day, pleasantly warm in the morning and scorchingly hot by noon, filled from sunrise to sunset with the work of survival. I was living at that time with a man who was not my husband, and everyone in the town knew it. They had seen me go through five marriages, and in their eyes there was no excuse for a woman who couldn’t please her first husband, much less her fifth. I hated the way they looked away whenever they saw me, the way the chatter of voices stopped whenever I approached. Each time I saw a neighbor woman grab the hands of her children and yank them across the road or into the doorway of a building when she saw me coming, I was filled with shame and anger. No one really knew what I had been through, but I would not give them the satisfaction of talking to anyone about it. I just kept to myself, and went out of my way to avoid them and their disapproving glares. That is why I came to the well at noon. You see, all of the other women came early in the morning, when the sun was not so hot, and the half-mile walk from the town to the well, carrying jars of water for the day’s use, did not seem so long. I learned long ago that the well during the morning social hour was a vicious place for a woman like me. So that day, as usual, I waited until they’d all returned to Sychar. Then I picked up my water jar and went out to the well.

As I neared the well, I saw a man sitting beside it. I could tell he was Jewish by the clothes he was wearing, so he must have been travelling between Judea and Galilee—a distance of about twenty-five miles. In order to avoid passing through Samaria, some Jews actually travelled around it, adding several days to their journey, just to avoid coming into contact with us Samaritans. They didn’t want to eat our food, or drink our water, to avoiding contaminating themselves with this “ritual uncleanness” they believed we carried. But some Jews did travel through our land, usually carrying their own supplies. When I saw this Jewish man near our well the whole ugly history of Samaritans’ encounters with Jews flashed through my mind.

In my generation very few men would interact in public with a woman. Most simply pretended that the women around them were invisible. So I pulled my scarf around my face, to make it easier for the man to ignore me. I kept my head low, and my eyes focused on the water jar—lowering it slowly into the well, being careful so it wouldn’t clank against the side. I heard the water flowing into the jar, felt the weight of it on the rope in my hand, and slowly, carefully pulled it back up to the rim of the well. I just as my jar cleared the edge of the well, water cascading from it, the
man spoke, “Will you give me a drink?” he asked. I was so startled I nearly dropped the jar back down into the well. He was so near, his voice so gentle. I took a step backwards, reeling inside. Why did he ask this? Why was he speaking across the social norms that most Jewish men worked so hard to maintain, and asking, of all things, to drink from my water jar? Samaritans were so despised by Jews that a Jew was considered unclean if he even used a drinking vessel that had been handled by a Samaritan. Could he be flirting with me?

I composed myself and said “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”

His response baffled me. “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

I looked around but did not see that he had any jar to draw water with. Besides, if he had one, why would he have asked me for a drink? And what did he mean by “living water”?

In our language the word he used for living means fresh, flowing water—the kind that comes from a spring bubbling up through the ground, not the flat, sometimes musty water you find in a well, even a good well like Jacob’s. I’d lived in Sychar all my life, and I’d never heard of such a spring anywhere in this area. And what was this about the gift of God? Who was this man to make such a claim? Was this yet another display of Jewish arrogance? By this time I was very puzzled. “Sir,” I said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?”

The man was silent for a moment, then he spoke slowly, looking straight at me. “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty. The water I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

I looked away. He’d gone from talking about the gift of God to saying that he himself could give this supernatural water. What a strange man! But maybe he had some kind of spiritual power. I still wasn't sure exactly what he was offering, but I'd made enough trips back and forth between the town and this well, carrying heavy jars of water, to know it would be wonderful not to have to come here every day. Whatever it was he had, it was worth a try. “Sir, give me this water,” I said, “so I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

I don’t know what I expected him to do, but I certainly didn’t anticipate his next request: “Go, call your husband and come back.”

I felt my face flush, and bent my head low, wiping the drops of water from the rim of the water jar, to hide my blushing cheeks. Why did he tell me to do that? How should I answer him? If he was going to do a miracle, maybe he wanted a man there to witness it since we women were not considered credible witnesses. Maybe he was like some rabbis who would not give spiritual instruction to a woman, but only to men. But then why would he have spoken to me alone in the first place? I considered going back to Sychar, finding the man I was living with, and begging him to come back to the well with me. But I felt as if that would be lying; he wasn’t my husband. And I wasn’t sure I could persuade him to come to the well with me in the middle of the day, to listen to some Jewish traveler talk about living water. I wondered again if he was flirting with me. What if this Jewish man was fishing for information about my personal life? What if this was a ploy, a kind of pick-up line? By this point I was wondering if I should have left the well as soon as he first asked me for a drink. The last thing I needed was a Jewish man pursuing me. What would my neighbors say next if they saw me talking here with him?

But on the other hand, there was something very different about him. His voice was clear and direct, not coy. He gazed right at me—didn’t flash me any knowing glances, no nudges or winks. And he had offered me this living water. How could I pass up the chance to taste that? Straightening up, I answered him simply: “I have no husband.”

He caught my eyes as I tried to look nonchalantly around. “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

And then he stopped. He didn’t scold me, or slap me, or take his eyes off me.

This man really did have supernatural power. He could see into me, my life, my history as if it had all been played out before his eyes. I was afraid, deeply afraid, and yet at the same time, there was something very calming about his gaze. It was as if he was saying: “I know you. I know everything about you. And I accept you.” I felt a rush of tears pile up in my eyes. Could he really know all my failure and shame, and still approach me in this gentle, almost searching way? What kind of man was this? I couldn’t let myself feel any more of this, or the tears might spill down my hot cheeks. His kindness was almost too much for me.

If he was a prophet, was it possible that he was the one promised in Deuteronomy, the one whom Jehovah would send as a prophet like Moses? But how could it be, that such a prophet, the Messiah, would speak with me—a Samaritan woman too ashamed of her life to come to the well with any of her neighbors? I couldn’t quite take in the mystery of it all. I decided that if Jehovah had so blessed me as to grant me a moment with a prophet, whoever he was, I would ask him the question that had burned in my mind for years. It was the question that haunted me whenever I looked at Mount Gerizim, and prevented me from ever feeling fully free to worship God. The stranger was Jewish, but he also clearly had some power from God. Perhaps he could look past the prejudices and settle this nagging doubt for me: Could I as a Samaritan worship God, here at the feet of Mount Gerizim, even without a temple?
“Sir,” I said to him, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

His response was nothing I could have guessed: “Believe me woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

I could not believe my ears. He had said that I would worship God, and neither here nor in Jerusalem. I had never heard a Jew say that Jehovah could be worshiped properly anywhere but in Jerusalem, in the temple there. I had never heard a Samaritan admit that Jehovah could be worshiped properly anywhere but on our mountain, Mount Gerizim. Yet here this Jewish prophet was telling me a time was coming when the location of the worshipers would not determine the holiness and acceptability of their worship of Jehovah, but only the quality of their worship—worship from the spirit that is whole-hearted and truthful. Not only that, but this man called Jehovah “Father,” and described God as seeking true worshipers, as if neither the Jewish temple-goers nor the Samaritans who pray to God as they gaze at Mount Gerizim are really worshiping Jehovah. How could that be? I was overwhelmed—the rush of emotions that I’d felt when he spoke about my husbands was still with me, and now my mind was racing. Who was this man?

Slowly, cautiously, I said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes he will explain everything to us.”

Then the man declared, “I who speak to you am he.”

At that moment I thought I was going to faint. My jaw dropped and I staggered backwards. Just then a group of other Jewish men arrived at the well—they must have been his travelling companions. They looked at me, and at him, with eyebrows raised in surprise that we were engaged in an intimate conversation, but none of them spoke, and it seemed they respected him very much. Suddenly it all became clear. These men were his followers, and he was far more than just a rabbi and a prophet. I looked at him again in wonder and awe. Could it be? Could he be Messiah?

He had known my dark secrets before he’d ever spoken to me, and the whole conversation had been his way of assuring me that he saw more in me than those shameful things. He knew my past, but he saw my potential. He knew my failure, but also my future. He knew my thirst, not just for daily water to drink with my mouth, but the thirst of my spirit to bring my whole being, my true self, to God in worship. The words of God from the prophet Jeremiah went through my mind: “My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” The ways I’d sought to quench the thirst of my spirit were like trying to take stale water from broken cisterns. This man was offering me the spring of living water, the spring of God himself, through himself, to bring life to the wasteland of my soul.

In an instant I knew it was all true, that he was true, that he was who he claimed to be. I couldn’t contain myself. I wanted to leap into the air, to shout with joy. I was overwhelmed with amazement and delight and gratitude, all at the same time. I had to share this! I had to tell my town who was sitting at the well of Jacob today. I ran back to Sychar and into the center of town crying “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”

That morning I’d been ashamed to go to the well with the other women, and now I was urging the women and men to follow me back to the well. There must have been something about the way I looked, the intensity in my voice, that convinced them that something very special had happened. Maybe they could tell my heart was dancing with joy after years of being weighed down with shame. Maybe they sensed the freshness in my spirit that had replaced the tired bitterness—because they all came back with me to meet him at the well.

That day many of them also came to believe that he was the Messiah we’d been waiting for, first because of what I told them, and then because of what they heard for themselves. They urged him to stay with us for awhile, and he did, in our Samaritan town, eating our food and drinking our water. This man, the Messiah, was unafraid of “ritual uncleanness” because he was the source of cleansing holiness. He and his followers stayed in our little town for two more days, and he taught us many things about the living water of God and true worship. What a joy those days were for me.

Among many other things, I learned that this man’s name is Jesus, and I tell you the truth today—He is still waiting for the well, the place where you go each day to do your daily work, offering each of you the refreshing, cleansing, healing water of life. So I invite you to come with me to Jesus. We will spend a few minutes in his presence together, talking and listening to him.

Just as he knew everything I’d ever done, he knows everything about you, and he still fully accepts you, because He deeply loves you. He sees possibilities in you that you aren’t even aware of. He sees your promise, your giftedness, your infinite worth. As you approach Jesus right now, name those things that you are most ashamed of, and bring them to him, so that you can come to him with your true self—no secrets, no hidden parts.

Perhaps there are questions that preoccupy your mind and keep you from being able to freely worship God from your spirit—doubts, wonderings. Release them to Jesus. The time is coming, for you as it was for me, when he will make all things clear.

What are the places in your heart that need refreshing? Healing? A new beginning? Tell him what you’re longing for.
Listen to Jesus' invitation to you: "Come, let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. The water that I give will become in them a fountain of water springing up into eternal life." Drink deeply.

Now go boldly back into your world, allowing the refreshing, cleansing, healing life of Jesus to flow through you to others.

1 John 4: 7
2 John 4:9
3 John 4:10
4 John 4:11-12
5 John 4:13-14, NRSV
6 John 4:15
7 John 4:16
8 John 4:17
9 John 4:17-18
10 John 4:19-20
11 John 4:21-24
12 John 4:25
13 John 4:26
14 Jeremiah 2:13
15 John 4:29
16 Rev. 22:17, NRSV
17 John 4:14, NRSV

BIBLIOGRAPHY


WALK IN THE GARDEN

"and the two shall become one flesh"

Won't you walk in the Garden with me,
And see me as Christ would see?
With me loving you and you loving me,

Won't you walk in the Garden with me?

Don't you ever get tired of playing the game?
These man/woman arguments—always the same.

Who is the head and who is the tail?

Have we concluded or have we just failed?

Failed because there is no love
When we start to speak of below and above

Of ruler and servant, of king and page—

Christ ushered us into a much better age.

We, too, can be one, as those two once were,

Original intention within us now stirred,
Restoration by Christ to original call,
If we'll just believe and come out from the Fall.

The glory—the splendor—of Adam and Eve
In Eden—together—as God 'one' had weaved
To raise up a family and tend to the land,
Together as one—with inseparable stand.

So come walk in the Garden with me,
And see me as Christ would see
With me loving you, and you loving me
Please come walk in the Garden with me.

Kimberly Ramos, 1994
Well, Frelard Tamales is here to deliver. In a summer with no street fairs, street fair food is finding new ways to come to you.

When COVID-19 arrived in Seattle, I was furloughed like many at The Stranger. For six weeks I sat at home oscillating between banana bread baking and using my tears of frustration as lube. All my shows had been watched, all my books had been read. I was starving for connection with others and the

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[Chorus] Well, we all fall in love But we disregard the danger Though we share so many secrets There are some we never tell Why were you so surprised that you never saw the stranger? Did you ever let your lover see the stranger in yourself? [Bridge] Don't be afraid to try again Everyone goes south every now and then You've done it Why can't someone else? You should know by now You've been there yourself. [Verse 2] Once I used to believe I was such a great romancer Then I came home to a woman that I could not recognize When I pressed her for a reason She refused to even answ