

“Jesus Finds a Partner”  
Lent 3A – March 8, 2026  
Dorothy Whiston – New Song Episcopal Church

Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11  
John 4:5-42

I’d like to begin this morning by extending blessings of freedom and empowerment to all the women, and men, here and everywhere, on this International Women’s Day. I think today’s Gospel about the woman at the well is a great story for celebrating this day.

But before I get to that, I’d like to address that part of Paul’s letter to the Romans we just heard. The first part of it reminds me a little of how Richard Rohr describes the formation of prophets. And really the formation of any mature life of faith. “Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, which does not disappoint because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Of course, our spiritual growth is not quite so linear or as automatic as that might sound. But Paul’s definitely on to something. And right that our spiritual maturity indeed comes more from God than it does from us. It’s all grace.

However, Paul appears to contradict all he’s said about the goodness of God when he says that the blood of Christ saves us from the *wrath* of God. What the . . .?! We’re back to an angry, punitive God?! The God who demands blood sacrifice?

In fact, this text, as originally written down, simply does not say that! In all the Greek renderings of Paul’s Letter to the Romans and in the earliest English translations – including the King James version – the words “of God” simply aren’t there.

Paul talks about wrath a good ten times in his letter to the Roman’s. And it’s quite clear he’s talking **not** about the wrath of God, but about the wrath we experience when God allows us to go our own way. He’s talking about the very *human* wrath of discord and violence that arises when we turn away from God, and then turn on one another.

Paul is talking about the kind of violence the Israelites were about to unleash on Moses as they wandered thirsty in the desert. He’s talking about the kind of wrath our government is inflicting on immigrants across our nation. He’s warning us about Operation Epic Fury now being inflicted on the Iranian people. Can you believe that many of our political, military, and *religious* leaders attribute this gory mess to the wrath of God?

It’s very sad to me – and dangerous to our world -- that eight out of twelve modern English translations of the Bible make this same mistake. They completely misrepresent Paul’s use of the word wrath. They proclaim this same sad misunderstanding of who God is and how God works in the world. Christendom continues to lose our way in the wilderness even as we seek the City of God.

Some of why this still happens will become clearer as we look at today's gospel story.

Most Jews of Jesus' day would have detoured around Samaria on their travels. The Jews and Samaritans had stridently maintained generations of sibling rivalry. Both peoples were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Members of the twelve tribes of Israel. They were geographically, ethnically, and religiously much more alike than they were different. And still, they saw each other as impure and unworthy, as bitter rivals.

And Jesus wasn't stopping at just any well to get a drink in the middle of the day. This was Jacob's well, an important place in the life of one of their common Hebrew patriarchs. And, to Jews, it was now in "alien" territory. So, Jesus definitely went there with intention.

This story is most often interpreted as Jesus generously engaging a woman who was an outcast among outcasts, and probably of loose morals. It's true that women didn't often fetch water alone in mid-day heat, but went in friend groups, usually in the early morning or at dusk.

But, we don't know that this nameless woman was immoral. Jesus never offers her forgiveness or even suggests she should repent of anything. We only come to know she's likely had a hard life, passing from man to man. Perhaps she'd been in a Levirate marriage and handed off to brother after brother when widowed. Or perhaps divorced repeatedly. Or some combination. Or something else entirely. We simply don't know.

But here is this woman – excluded, isolated, likely impoverished – arriving at the well only to find a strange man there. It's very wrong for him to speak to her on many levels. He's a Jew; she's Samaritan. He's a rabbi; she's a woman – meant to learn only from male kin. To say nothing of him being an adult male and her a grown woman not known to him. Wells were the "watering holes" of that day – often the place of romantic encounters. Like Jacob and Rachel.

She doesn't know if this rather forward man has good intentions or not and so is rightfully wary. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

To which Jesus replies, "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.

She responds quite literally, like Nicodemus did last week, pointing out he doesn't have a bucket. And she even challenges him about presuming to be greater than their common ancestor Jacob. So Jesus makes it clear he's offering her new life in God with his water that gushes up to eternal life.

Unlike Nicodemus, a man who personifies the patriarchal culture of empire and so has a lot to lose, She-who-has-nothing immediately trusts in Jesus. So she's able to understand what he's offering and to know she wants it. She eagerly asks for his living water.

Then Jesus apparently goes off on a tangent, telling her to go get her husband and come back. On a personal level, he's letting her know that just as she's been able to see him deeply enough to trust him, he also sees – and accepts -- her just as she is.

But there's a lot more going on here than meets the average 21st century eye. Many scripture scholars point out that when Jesus interacts with one person in the gospels he's also interacting with that person's culture. Here, Jesus is purposefully crossing several boundaries – ethnicity, religion, and gender politics to name a few. He crosses these boundaries to invite the woman he met at the well to be his partner in inaugurating the universal dimension of the Kin-dom of God!

Her immediate recognition of Jesus as a prophet shows she understands the social ramifications of his remarks about her husbands and the current man in her life. That they can be understood as cultural symbols as well as personal relationships. Jesus is commenting on the whole social system as much as on her personal story. And this makes her trust him even more.

Trust him enough, in fact, to bring up their cultures' long-held religious differences. Jesus responds that it's not about correct religious observance, but something else altogether. Something much deeper. I love how Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus in his contemporary version of the Bible, *The Message*. His Jesus says:

“The time is coming -- it has, in fact, come – when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people God is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before God in their worship. God is sheer being itself – Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

The way Jesus answers her touches her so deeply she risks taking their budding spiritual friendship deeper by proclaiming her belief in the coming Messiah, which was not without controversy among both Jews and Samaritans. Then Jesus takes their holy friendship deeper still, revealing himself fully to her. “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” This is the only time Jesus tells anyone he is the Messiah in all of John's gospel. He doesn't even tell his closest disciples.

The Samaritan woman is speechless at Jesus' total self-giving. And she knows just what to do. She heads back to her community, a woman healed – personally, socially, and culturally. She no longer sees herself through the eyes of others. She is no longer trapped in a snare of divisions, no longer caught up in the wrath of the world. She sees herself – and her world – through the eyes of the one true, all-loving God.

She is born of and living in the Spirit, so she reaches out to share the good news, to include everyone in her good fortune. And it turns out it's entirely contagious when passed on “in Spirit and in truth!”

So her people come and get to know Jesus, who stays with them two whole days on his way to Jerusalem, longer than he stops anywhere else. And they come to say about him, “we know that this is the Savior of the world.” Not just their personal Lord and Savior, but one birthing a whole new, holy people. One ushering in a new social order – the ‘kindom’, the culture of God. Free of division and wrath. Filled with God’s love and mercy.

It’s coming y’all! It’s a-coming! Let us commit to doing our part to bring it along, shall we?

Amen. Thanks be to God.