

Third Sunday in Lent

DEAD OR ALIVE?

John 4:5-42

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

5So he (Jesus) came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

7A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9The Samaritan woman said to him, "How it is that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans.) 10Jesus answered her, "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." 11The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 13Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." 15The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

16Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18for you

have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" 19The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the people must worship in Jerusalem." 21Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22You worship what you do not know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." 26Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

27Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or "Why are you speaking with her?" 28Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" 30They left the city and were on their way to him.

31Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." 32But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" 34Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 35Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. 36The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38I sent you to reap

that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

39Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything that I have done.” 40So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. 41And many believed because of his word. 42They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

DIAGNOSIS: The World In Need of Saving

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Preoccupation with the Body*

This text bubbles with enough material for five sermons. After hearing it read, we find ourselves weary from digesting too many words. Part of our difficulty in hearing the story about Jesus’ visit to Jacob’s well is that he and the woman, along with the disciples, are talking past each other. He is on one wavelength; the rest are on another. And it’s all about what is needed in life. Clearly, the woman and the disciples, as is true for all of us, are preoccupied with the needs of the body-water, food, and rest. Even Jesus is “tired out” (v. 6). We seem almost obsessed with what to eat and what not to eat, what prescription drug to use and not to use, how to remain sexually active, and how to stay healthy and live longer. We worry about our water supply, air pollution and toxic waste. In short, we seem to be totally absorbed by the needs and wants of the body.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Thirsty and Hungry*

So much so, that we rarely take time to look within. If we did,

and whenever we do, we might become aware of a loss of spirit, a thirst and a hunger waiting to be satisfied. As the woman at the well is thinking about drinking water, Jesus tells her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again" (v. 13). On another occasion when the subject was eating bread, Jesus told others, "Do not work for the food that perishes" (John 6:27) and "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died" (6:49). Whether it is the loss of "spirit and truth" (v. 24) or our neglect of it, we have succeeded in finding ourselves only in what fulfills our bodily and sensate needs. Indeed we suffer the most in our living from having no relationship with the divine, having no dimension of life with and in God. The woman says to Jesus, "Sir, give me this (running) water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (v. 15), and the disciples urge Jesus, "Rabbi, eat something" (v. 31). All seem to know little of our deepest need, our rescue from death.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – No Longer Alive

Does this mean that we are not really living? Is it possible that with all of our eating and drinking, our scrambling and climbing that we are already dead? What a sobering thought that is! What a tragedy it is to be alive, walking, talking, thinking, feeling, going through all the motions and not knowing or loving or worshipping the living God. What a calamity to discover that even the grave is not the end of that kind of death. It's one thing to want to be saved from hunger and thirst, disease and disability, and find little consolation. But it is quite another thing to pursue a life that is already death-a life deserving of the final judgment of God-when that turns out to be our greatest need of all.

PROGNOSIS: The Saving of the World

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – The Coming of the

Messiah

Perhaps now we are ready to hear and understand what Jesus is saying to the woman, the disciples, and all of us. When the woman acknowledges to Jesus, “Messiah is coming (who) will proclaim all things to us” (v. 25), Jesus tells her what he has not told another soul before, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (v. 26). Just then the disciples return, interrupting the moment, and the woman, speechless, heads back to town. But, now she can begin to connect the dots, as Jesus had offered her, “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (v. 14). Jesus already knew there could be no gushing water of life for the woman or for us unless he would be drained of his holy life-as enunciated in his cry from the cross, “I thirst” – suffering the death we had chosen and giving us the life we could not choose. Likewise, when Jesus said to his disciples, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work” (v. 33), he knew there could be no life for us unless he offered his body-as enunciated in his cry from the cross, “It is finished” – completing the work we could not do by becoming “the true bread from heaven” (John 6:32), taking our perishable natures, which we could not change and give to us instead his own imperishable life. Truly, he is “the Savior of the world” (v. 42)!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *The Gift of the Spirit*

There is no way that we could know this or have this “gift of God” (v. 10), unless the Holy Spirit enters our mundane world and brings us face-to-face with the living God embodied in Jesus Christ. Whatever it is that we might have longed for to give meaning to our lives, the answer is found not in what we find but rather in what finds us, what comes only as a gift. The gift of the Messiah is an offer that we could neither desire nor

deserve, a gift that transforms those who hold it. The gift itself is the power, the “spirit and truth” that creates faith and new life by raising us from the dead and setting us on a path that is eternal. By the testimony of the Spirit who “proclaims all things to us” (v. 25), even in the telling of “the woman’s testimony” (v. 39), which is really none other than Jesus “word” (v. 41), we have “the Savior of the world” (v. 42), the one who “gushes up to eternal life” (v. 14) in our hearts. Besides, in the water of our baptism we die and rise with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4), and at his Table our hunger and thirst is satisfied, as the communion hymn refrain expresses it, “Eat this bread, drink this cup, come to me and never be hungry...trust in me and you will not thirst.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Signs of Life*

What that means is that the eternal life of Jesus that gushes up within us meets our every need, transforms the whole of our existence. For one thing, our worship life takes on a new dimension, as the liturgy becomes an encounter with our Lord Jesus Christ, where we worship him, not only in Samaria or in Jerusalem, but everywhere “in spirit and in truth” (v. 23). For another, the Spirit empowers us to join him in “harvesting” (v. 27) and in “the gathering of fruit for eternal life” (v. 36) by our lively witness of the good news to those who do not yet know that in him they have already “passed from death to life” (John 5:24). For still another, our eating and drinking is no longer a dead end but rather takes on a new dimension, as we receive our food and drink with thanksgiving to God and as we share our blessings with our neighbor. To be sure, in all these ways we are completing his “work” (v. 14), as we get to become people who are now signs of life, following the Christ, no longer dead but alive now and forever.