

**Lent Week 3**  
**“Leave Your Jar Behind” John 4:5-45**  
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It’s a bit ironic that the character that is introduced in the Gospel reading this morning is a reasonably well-known biblical character since one of the things that is significant about her in the story is the fact that she was a “nobody.” Within the larger narrative of John, her story is told following the story of Nicodemus. In contrast to Nicodemus who is a *man*, who is identified by *name*, and is a *Pharisee*- all things which gave him status and made him a *somebody*, she is a woman, unnamed, and a Samaritan. Women had no status and there was a longstanding prejudice amongst the Jews against the Samaritans who had failed, for a variety of reasons, to maintain their ethnic and religious purity. We are meant to recognize that she is not a person of any standing or importance whatsoever, and that is what makes Jesus’s interaction with her so remarkable. He sees this nobody as a somebody, and he disregards all of the cultural, and ethnic, and religious rules that would prevent any kind of interaction between a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman and talks to her anyway.

This alone is one of the key teaching points about this story. Jesus intentionally passes through Samaria and intentionally speaks with this woman – two things that a “good Jew” wouldn’t have done. John includes these details to show the truth of the claim made in John 3:16 that God so loved *the world*. Jesus passed through Samaria, a region filled with foreigners and unclean people, because the Son was sent to reveal God to people from every tribe and every nation, and that’s what Jesus does while he is there. When he speaks to the woman, he breaks the social and religious barriers, showing that God accepts all people and God does not discriminate against or exclude people based on any of the factors that people use as a basis for discrimination and exclusion all the time. This is good news for all of us, and it may resonate in a special way for any who identify with the woman in feeling like or being treated like a nobody in the eyes of others. We are all somebody in God’s eyes, and Jesus reveals himself to all kinds of people proving that it’s true.

You may have remembered from hearing this story before that the woman was a nobody, and you may also recall hearing that not only was the woman a nobody, but like Zacchaeus the tax-collector and the woman caught in adultery, this woman was a sinner with a bad reputation. This is a common label that Bible commentators and preachers have long attached to this woman based on what Jesus says to her Verses 17 and 18. When she tells Jesus that she doesn’t have a husband, he tells her that she has spoken truthfully. In fact, you have had five husbands, he says, and the one you live with now is not your husband. The case *could* be made that, yes, she was a sinner because she was living with a man that was not her husband and there may have been a long list of other sins but none of them are mentioned here. The characterization of the woman as a sinner and the fact that Jesus is willing to talk with her despite that fact, allows us to see in this story another example of Jesus showing grace to sinners, but based on what we read in the text, this isn’t necessarily the most accurate characterization.

The fact that this woman had had five husbands and was living with a man who wasn’t her husband does not mean that the woman was an adulteress or a prostitute. Women in our time and culture can marry and divorce freely and for any reason, but that wasn’t true for this

woman at that time. A husband could divorce *her*, and he could divorce her for being “unclean, unlovable, or incapable of fulfilling her wifely duties.” She didn’t get a say in the matter, and she could have been abandoned through no fault of her own. She might have had the misfortune of being married to five different men who failed to fulfill their commitment to love, and protect, and provide for her because one woke up one day and decided he didn’t love her, or because one didn’t like the way she made his dinner, or because another thought she was too argumentative. In all likelihood, though, she probably hadn’t been divorced five times. She had probably been widowed. Maybe once, maybe twice, maybe all five times, and at this stage in her life, maybe she had been taken in by a man who had been willing to take care of her though not as her husband. It wasn’t necessarily an immoral relationship, and maybe it was her best option for getting her basic needs met. When we take these things into consideration, perhaps the more notable thing about the woman is not that she was a sinner, but that she was a *survivor*.

Maybe you and I haven’t had to survive in the aftermath of the same misfortunes that this woman endured, but at some level in some way, I think we can all identify with being a survivor because life in this world is hard and unfair. Everyone in this room is probably trying to survive *something* right now – school, inflation, a challenging job, an illness, grief, parenting, a mental health struggle, an identity crisis, a faith crisis. Some of us have more advantages and get better breaks than others, and it’s worth acknowledging that, but even so. No one is entirely exempt from pain and hardship. We all have to survive something as we make our way in life, and in Genesis we find out why.

During the first week of Lent, In the Bible study that some of us are doing during Lent, we studied the Old Testament lectionary passage which took us back to Genesis where we read the story of how God created a beautiful world, and placed Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden. Their purpose there was to enjoy and care for the world that God had made, but then they wanted more, and they believed the serpent who suggested that God was withholding something good from them. They ate from the tree from which God had warned them not to eat, and from there everything went wrong. As a consequence of their disobedience, they were banished from Eden and the earth was cursed. In Genesis 3:17-19, God says to Adam, “***Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it,” cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; <sup>18</sup> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken you are dust, and to dust you shall return.***”

Ever since then, survival has been the name of the game for all of us, and sometimes surviving can become an all-encompassing preoccupation. For some in especially hard circumstances, it may be all they can think about from the moment their eyes open until they close at night. For any of us, though, when we’re trying to survive something that is making life particularly hard and painful, our focus can become almost singularly focused on the thing and on what we need to get or on what we need to do push through the challenge and just make it through to the next day. We get to the next day, and we’re alive physically, but we may feel fragile, and empty, and short on hope. After days on end of this, it can feel like there is no real purpose or meaning to life. We may lose motivation. The world does offer distractions that we can grasp on to in the hopes of getting some relief from the relentless day in and day work of survival, but they don’t save us from our situation and sometimes, depending on the chosen

distraction, they can make the situation even worse. The thing we turned to for relief can become an unhealthy addiction. We need something more than distractions and addictions. What the human heart needs is freedom from the curse that turned abundant life into arduous labor, and we need a connection to the One who offers us true life, which is life that we can only *receive* and never *achieve* on our own. We need exactly what the woman in our story found. Or, really, we need to be found by the One who found the woman.

On the day that John describes, this woman who had already survived so much, was still at the task of surviving. In the heat of the day, she was going to the well to fill her jar with the water that would bring her to the next day, when she would likely do the same thing again. Jesus spoke to her, his first words being the first glimmer of light piercing the spiritual darkness in which she still existed. With every response to her questions, he offered a little more light. *This* is why he told her what he knew about her past and present life. She had already begun to perceive that someone who offers living water must be great. “Are you greater than our ancestor, Jacob who gave us the well?” she asked. When he told her things about her life that he couldn’t have known, she perceived a little more. “I see that you are a prophet,” she said. All along, Jesus was steering the conversation toward a revelation of God not a revelation of her sin. That’s what is important in this story. It was the revelation of God, who was right there with her, not off on Mt. Gerazim where she and her people worshipped, and not in Jerusalem where the Jews worshipped, but right there with her that Jesus gave to her there at the well, and *she saw it*. The revelation was a bright and clear to her as the noonday sun that was shining overhead, and she realized that the life that had eluded her for all of those years and the life that she longed for could be found in the One who had offered her living water.

We know that she got it because she went into town and invited others to come and see Jesus and she told them what he had said to her and about what she had come to believe, but even before she says anything to anyone, John tells us that she left her water jar. That water jar was essential to her survival. Day in and day out she carried it to the well to fill it with the water that would keep her body going and enable her to wake up again and do the work of surviving all over again. When she left it behind, it was a sign that she had received and embraced the true and abundant life that Jesus had offered to her. Life wouldn’t just be about surviving anymore. Now she had tasted living water and that water would sustain her and carry her and empower her to be more than a survivor. Now she would live an abundant and flourishing life in all of its fullness. What would that look like? Would all of her troubles disappear? Would it bring her husbands back from the dead? Would she suddenly become a person with status? It didn’t mean that everything would become easy all at once, but it meant that from that point forward she would be reconnected with her Creator. She would be restored and set free to fulfill her God-given purpose. She would be filled with every spiritual blessing- God’s gifts of love, and joy, and peace, and hope – that would change her heart and her mind and her whole life.

Some of us here today may feel like we are stuck in the daily grind of survival. Someone is just working to pay the bills. Someone is walking on eggshells to survive a marriage. Someone else is struggling just to get out of bed each day because the weight of depression is so heavy. Someone else is consumed with trying to please everyone else because without the acceptance of others you can’t accept yourself. Every day we are working to fill our water jars, doing whatever it is we feel like we have to do just to make it through to the next day. There’s little or no joy. There’s little hope that things will change or get better. There’s no real relief from the

burden you're carrying, and maybe there's a voice inside your head that you hear asking, "is there more to life than this?"

I know that it's true that Jesus still shows up in unlikely places. He still goes out of his way to look for God's struggling, hurting children who are buried under or maybe just feeling the weight of the burden of survival. He still goes looking for thirsty souls, and he is still offering living water to all who will receive it and drink it. If he's looking for you, he will find you just like he found the woman at the well. He will find you. He will get your attention, and he wants for you to engage him. If at first you aren't sure, if you have more questions, it's ok. He is patient, but he is also eager. He is eager to give you the drink that your soul longs for. He is eager to give you abundant and everlasting life so that you can leave your jar behind, too. And if you've tasted that water before, but it's been a long time since you took a long, deep drink from that spring of living water, come back to the spring. It is an ever-flowing spring always available to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.