



The Forgotten Water Jar

Sunday, February 23, 2025

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Gospel Lesson, John 4:23-42

[Jesus said to the Samaritan woman] ²³ “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

²⁷ Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

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²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

³¹ Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.”

³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

³³ Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

³⁴ “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. ³⁵ Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷ Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers.

⁴² They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”

Over the past few weeks, we’ve looking at the opening chapter of John’s Gospel. John is very precise about how he structured his gospel, and he opens with four interviews. In each interview, Christ is presented to a different segment of the population, and each interviewer comes to Christ with a different need. In each case, Christ meets his or her need.

The first interview is in John 1 where Christ is approached by John’s disciples; they represent expectant Jews. Their need is **spiritual**, and they were quick to follow Jesus.

The second interview is the familiar conversation Jesus had with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus represents the larger body of Jews, and his need is **intellectual**.

Jumping ahead to the fourth interview, we come to the Roman nobleman of John 4:46-54. This interview represents Christ’s presentation to the Gentiles. The nobleman comes to Jesus, pleading for healing for his son who is near death. The nobleman’s need is **physical**.

Backing up to the third interview, we find today’s passage from John 4 which includes the conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. She represents the Samaritan people, and we find that her need is **emotional**.

These four interviews also tell us that Christ came for the poor and the privileged. He came for women on the margins of society, and he came for men of high standing. We spent some time last week with the Samaritan woman at the well. However, there’s an interesting little detail in verse 28 that we didn’t have the time to explore: “Then, *leaving her water jar*, the woman went back to the town...”

It seems like such an insignificant detail. And yet, it’s a detail that I believe gets to the heart of what this story is all about.

Why did the woman at the well leave her water jar?

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I know it's purely speculative, but sometimes it's fun to speculate if we can find truth and meaning even in the midst of our speculations.

So why did the woman at the well leave her water jar?

I'd like to suggest four possible reasons. **The first is because she simply forgot it.**

I know that doesn't sound very profound, but as soon as we suggest that she leaves her water jar because she forgot it, we must ask ourselves: **Why?** After all, the woman went to Jacob's well with a single purpose: to get water. But then, during her daily routine, she experiences a chance encounter with Jesus Christ. The fact that she left her water jar behind suggests that in meeting Christ, she had found a higher purpose for her life.

There's a little chorus in our hymnal that goes like this: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus / Look full in his wonderful face / And the things of earth (like water jars) will grow strangely dim / in the light of his wonderful face" (UMH No. 349).

Maybe that's what happened to this Samaritan woman. She turned her eyes off her water jar and on to Someone who could quench her deepest thirsts.

Encountering Jesus ought to have that kind of an effect on a person. Jesus tends to change our purposes in life. Without Jesus, we are generally focused on our own needs and desires. After the Samaritan woman met Jesus, she had a new purpose in life, so left her water jar behind and went back to town to tell the others about the Man she'd just met.

When you think about it, that's really quite remarkable, especially when you consider who this woman really was. Verse 6 tells us this meeting took place at about noon. That was not the time of day when women would ordinarily go down to the well; it was the heat of the day. Most women went early in the morning to get the water their day's supply of water. But this Samaritan woman was willing to wait, enduring thirst and putting off her morning chores. Why? The answer is probably because of what we read in verse 18: this woman has been married five times and was now living with another man without the benefit of marriage.

Can you imagine the kind of whispers which followed her wherever she went? No wonder she went down to Jacob's well at high noon! She wanted to go when she wouldn't have to be subjected the knowing leers and the whispered gossip of the other women of Sychar. In other words, her purpose wasn't simply to get water; her purpose also seems to have been to hang on to any little shred of dignity she might have left.

But then she met the Master, and she left her water jar. She had a new purpose in life. More than that, she had a new dignity in life. And when she went back to Sychar to tell the Samaritans about who she found, she became Christianity's first evangelist. She led her neighbors to Christ, and they became believers for themselves, despite the fact that she was a woman who lived on the margins of society. We don't even know her name! But in finding a new purpose in life, she found a new dignity. Once she forgot her water jar, she earned the admiration of the other citizens of Sychar because she led them to faith in the Messiah.

All this leads us to our second possible reason for why the Woman at the Well left her water jar. It was because she discovered that **what she forgot couldn't compare to what she found.**

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I don't preach four-point outlines very often anymore, so I've kind of muddled the lines between my first point ("She forgot it") and my second point ("What she forgot couldn't compare to what she found.") Indeed, the little chorus, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" works just as well here as it did under my second point.

Regardless, the Samaritan woman forgot her water jar, but in its place, she found Living Water, and you don't need a water jar for that. And along with the Living Water, she found acceptance. Christ didn't judge her for having had five husbands and for living with yet another man; he offered her acceptance.

Apparently she never found acceptance in her marriages, and that's a sad thing. Most people enter into a marriage believing that will bring acceptance, but it doesn't always work out that way. As for this woman, she never found the love and acceptance that she craved despite her multiple relationships with men.

Until she met the Son of Man.

Jesus spoke to her, even though she was female and, in that society, someone who occupied a lower rung on the social ladder. Jesus spoke to her, even though she was a Samaritan and, in that society, a lesser human being. Jesus spoke to her, even though she had been married five times and was living with a sixth man. In that society, that made her an outcast. And yet, the very fact that Jesus spoke to her made it clear to her that he accepted her—background and all. He spoke to her, not because he had some carnal interest in her, but because he was vitally interested in the condition of her soul.

Once the Samaritan woman realized that the Messiah accepted her, warts and all, she left her water jar. But she gained something that was so much greater. She gained purpose. She gained dignity. And she gained acceptance by Jesus Christ.

And you can gain the same from him as well.

A third possible reason as to why the woman at the well left her water jug is that **she left it as a gift for Jesus**. When they first met, Jesus asked for a drink because he had no water jug and no bucket. He did, however, offer her living water to drink. What could she offer him in return? She may very well have left her water jar as a gift for the Master. It was a small gift, especially compared to what he gave to her. But Christ maintains the ability of turning our meager loaves and fishes into food for multitudes.

A fourth possible reason why the Samaritan woman left her water jar was that she realized **her water jar was keeping her from a more important task**.

This represents what we might call the "Hebrews 12:1 Principle." The author writes:

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...

Let's face it: toting a water jug around weighs you down, especially you're carrying it on your head, as she almost certainly would have done. Now, she realized that she had to get about the work of the kingdom of God.

I wonder: what are the water jugs in your life? What are the things that you're trying to balance or hang onto that are keeping you down from doing the things God wants you to do?

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They're not necessarily sinful things or even bad things. There's certainly nothing inherently wrong with a water jug. In fact, water jugs serve an important purpose in life, even more so when this woman walked the dusty roads of Sychar. But even those things which are good, and which serve a purpose in life can keep us from fulfilling the will of God.

I'll say it another way: We can get so bogged down doing things that are urgent that we never get around to doing those things which are important.

The other day I got a big fancy white envelope in the mail. Big red letters said it was "URGENT." I opened up the envelope to see what was so urgent and found a business proposition inside in which I had absolutely no interest. I tossed it in the recycling bin.

There's a difference between urgent and important. For the Samaritan woman, getting water was no doubt necessary. It may even have been urgent. But getting involved in the work of the kingdom of God was important. So she had no choice but to leave her water jar.

I'm beginning to wonder if the Samaritan woman actually forgot her water jar. I'm beginning to think that she left it intentionally. It was her choice to leave it at the well.

Ash Wednesday is only ten days away. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, and Lent is typically a time when we talk about making choices. What will we choose to surrender? What new habits will we develop in place of the habits that we've intentionally forgotten? The Samaritan woman and the water jar she left behind remind us of our daily need to sort out our priorities—to daily choose that which is important, even if it means setting aside those things which seem to be urgent, but which draw us away from Christ.