

“The Savior of the World”

John 4:4-42

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The scene that marks the conclusion of the extended story found in John 4 is almost without compare. Crowded together for a group photo are the many people of a Samaritan town. The disciples of Jesus have also squeezed in. Jesus is obviously front and center. And almost pushed out to the edge is the woman with whom it all began, the woman who met Jesus at the well. The caption capturing this climactic conclusion clearly conveys what makes this scene so memorable. “This man really is the Savior of the world.” This man is Jesus. A whole Samaritan village has come to recognize and to confess that Jesus is the Savior of the world. How did this happen?

The statement, “The Savior of the world” occurs only twice in all of the New Testament. Both times the statement is found in what is referred to as the Johannine writings. In I John 4:14, as the writer of the first letter of John explores the depths of love found in Jesus, the love that is shared by the community that has come to life through Jesus the writer proclaims, “We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.” And here, in our passage this morning, in a story known commonly as, “The woman at the well,” we find out that whatever took place at that well, with that woman, and with a thirsty man who asked the woman for a drink, whatever happened between that woman and Jesus, the thirsty man, at the well named after the patriarch Jacob, whatever happened that day led to a revival that transformed a whole town, so much so that with one voice the people of the town proclaimed, “We know this man really is the Savior of the world.” How did this crowded scene of conversion come to be?

- How did the people of the town come to be in this crowded scene of conversion?

The woman who met Jesus at the well, the woman who by the end of the story is sort of pushed to the periphery, she is the one who tells the

townsfolk about Jesus. This woman meets Jesus at the well. They have an absolutely amazing encounter, an encounter that reaches an epic climax when in response to her question about the coming of the promised Messiah, Jesus tells her, "I am he!" Jesus tells the woman he is the Messiah. Jesus uses words that capture his divine presence, the words, "Ego eimi". Like God who revealed himself to Moses so long ago by saying, "I am who I am", Jesus answers the woman's quest to find the Messiah by telling her, "I am." Such knowledge is too wonderful and amazing for her. She leaves the jar she had brought to draw water at the well and rushes off to the town, where she invites everyone to, "Come and see." Come and see. That is what Jesus said to Andrew in the first chapter of John, when Andrew wanted to see where Jesus was staying. "Come and see." By the end of that day Andrew was breathlessly telling his brother Peter, "We have found the Messiah" Now this woman who meets Jesus at the well races to her people, excitedly inviting them all to, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" Her invitation was so authentic, her invitation was so intriguing, her invitation was so enticing the people came out of town and made their way toward Jesus.

One woman witnessed to the people of her town. Apparently, her witness was effective. John tells us many from her town believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony, because of her witness that, "He told me everything I ever did." Racing to meet this man who told the woman everything she ever did, the people of the town meet Jesus. They are so taken with him that they ask him to stay with them. They want more of Jesus. And Jesus gives them more. Jesus stays with them two days. As he spoke words to the people of the town, even more of them became believers. Finally, they find the woman who started this whole revival, and they say something that speaks volumes about the process of conversion. "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." The words of the woman were crucial. They play a central role in this whole dramatic tale of conversion. But the goal of her words was to draw people to the Messiah, to the Christ, to Jesus. Her words worked. Her witness worked. Her testimony was effective.

The people of the town no longer relied on what she had experienced, on her encounter, on what she knew. Now the people of the town had their own experience with Jesus, their own encounter with Jesus, and their own knowledge of Jesus. That's how the people of the town came to be in this crowded scene of conversion. The woman at the well told them come and see, and boy did they ever.

- How did the disciples come to be in this crowded scene of conversion?

It might seem obvious how the disciples came to be in this crowded scene of conversion where the people of a town are proclaiming that Jesus is the Savior of the world. The disciples were followers of Jesus. Jesus invited the disciples to follow him. Jesus invited the disciples to come and see. Of course, the disciples were with Jesus. But in this particular episode, their involvement is not central to the story. In a sense they are riding on someone else's coattails. Here is what I mean. The story begins with Jesus meeting a woman at the well. Jesus is alone when he meets the woman. Why is he alone? The disciples had gone into the town to buy food. In this story, the disciples are offstage for the whole conversation Jesus has with the woman. When Jesus finally reveals his Messianic identity to the woman, when he answers her search for the Messiah with those words so filled with meaning, "I, the one speaking to you, I am he," it is not until all of this happens that the disciples make their appearance in this compelling drama.

They return from their food foraging to find Jesus talking to the woman he met at the well. They were surprised to find him talking to a woman. (More about that later) But they don't ask him, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her." No sooner do the disciples arrive on the scene, than the woman makes her initial exit. Now that she knows Jesus is the Messiah, the great I AM, she heads back to town to all the people there the things she told all the people there, that she met a man who told her everything she did and with her testimony, all the people come to Jesus. So the disciples finish their foraging, find Jesus with the woman, the woman races back to the town, leaving her water

jar behind (very interesting), and then, and only then do Jesus and the disciples have a conversation.

Their conversation begins with the disciples urging Jesus to have something to eat. Rather than greedily grabbing some grub, Jesus says, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about?” This brings surprised whispers from the disciples about whether someone somehow brought him some food in their absence. But that is not the case. Instead, Jesus uses this moment to turn the attention of the disciples away from physical food and toward spiritual food. This is a teachable moment. Jesus says, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” While the disciples are hungering as humans do for physical food, Jesus has been fed and filled to the very core of his being by doing the work of the Father. His conversation with the woman at the well, a conversation that began with the very physical need to quench a very physical thirst has gone off in an absolutely amazing and inspiring direction so that the woman has come to desire the living water only Jesus has to offer. She has come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Now, even as Jesus speaks with his disciples, the woman is off evangelizing her town and bringing a whole horde of people to find this same living water. Understandably, the mind of Jesus is not focused on physical food at that moment. For the one who came to finish the Father’s work, the revival that is breaking out in a nearby village has left him satisfied and spiritually fed.

To help his disciples understand what has transpired, to help his disciples understand what has shifted his attention from physical hunger to spiritual hunger, Jesus tells the disciples that basically, on this day, the whole pattern of planting and harvesting, a process that is usually separated by months, has been upended in a surprising burst of spiritual energy that has led to a joyful result. The planting and the harvesting have occurred at the very same time. The sower is out sowing and the harvesters are fast on his heels and it is all happening at once. The woman was saved...her town has heard her testimony...and now they are being saved...and by the end of the story everyone has joined together, exclaiming exultantly, “Now we know this man really is the Savior of the world.” And you disciples of mine, your mind is on some

soggy sandwiches? Put that food away and come share in this harvest. It is a harvest of which you neither planted, sowed, or reaped...but today, in the kingdom of heaven, you get to feast on what others have worked for so hard. "Others have done the hard work", Jesus tells his disciples, "and you have reaped the benefits of their labor." Without knowing exactly who Jesus means when he says others have done the hard labor, let us use that statement as a way to explore the woman who undoubtedly gets credit for doing at least some of the hard work, the woman Jesus met at the well.

- How did the woman at the well come to be in this crowded scene of conversion?

It turns out the woman was at the right place at the right time. She just happened to go out to the well, a well situated outside of the town she will later evangelize, just when Jesus arrived asking for a drink of water. How lucky can you get, to be at the right place at the right time. But in her case, being at the right place at the right time doesn't really capture just how right it was for her to be at that place at that time, and to meet that man named Jesus. You might almost say that this was the first time something went right for her in her life.

Everything about this story points to a woman who is well-acquainted with a life where everything goes wrong. In her world, being a woman was not the right thing. Men dominated her world. She was not only a woman, she was a Samaritan woman. She herself recognizes how the Samaritans are looked down on by the Jewish people. She recognizes that for Jesus, a Jewish man, to have conversation with her, a Samaritan woman, is breaking all sorts of conventions. When Jesus asks her for a drink of water, her reply implies a raised eyebrow. "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" In case we do not understand the impropriety, John helps us out with a sidebar. "Jews do not associate with Samaritans." When the food seeking disciples return and find Jesus talking with the woman, we are told they were surprised to find him talking with a woman. A woman who was a Samaritan. In that culture, at that time, at that place, being a Samaritan woman meant things had gone wrong for you.

At least as a woman and as a Samaritan, there are other women and other Samaritans who share her fate. What is uncovered in this mesmerizing conversation between the Samaritan woman and the Jewish man named Jesus is that this woman has a past which has set her apart...and not in a good way. At one telling point in the conversation when the woman is showing interest in the words of Jesus, he tells her to call her husband. You can almost sense the pain in her reply, perhaps even shame. "I have no husband." What Jesus does next might seem extremely cruel, except that as we already know, Jesus is the Christ. We already know God sent him because God loves the world. When the woman says she has no husband, Jesus literally looks into her soul and says, "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." Ouch. When Jesus drills, he drills deep.

How did the woman at the well come to be in this crowded scene of conversion? Quite simply, Jesus was thirsty and he asked her for a drink. Now, uncovering what was surely a source of pain and most likely shame, Jesus lays bare the thirst in her life. Many have noted that the woman came to the well all by herself. She came at an unusual hour, at noon, in the middle of what surely was a hot time of the day. Speculation is she endured the glare of the sun because she did not want to endure the glare of the people of her town. We don't know why she had five husbands, but the fact that there have been five must certainly represent failure, even it is just the failure of a marriage to endure, whether it be by death or any other means. She came at noon, willing to endure the glare of the sun because she did not want to endure the glare of the people. She could bring her water jar and fill it day by day by day, but with all that is wrong in her life, she would always come up empty. The water she was drawing did not replenish the soul. Her spirit was barren. Her heart was broken. Her hopes were crushed.

Jesus, as only Jesus can do, moves the conversation from her brokenness, from her glaring emptiness to an invitation to experience the presence of God through the Spirit of God and through the truth of God. She sought to divert his attention with a question about whether Jews or

Samaritans were right in the place they chose to worship. In so many words, Jesus says that he, the Truth of God who has come into the world, combined with the Spirit of God that comes through Jesus, will create a new type of worship that is by the Spirit and by the Truth, and this worship will bring her into a life changing relationship with God the Father in heaven. She hears Jesus. She has endured the glare not of the sun, but of the Son of God, and she has discovered he comes not to consume with judgement and wrath, but to consume with Spirit and Truth, to fill up human lives with a love that quenches the deepest thirst of the human soul. She tells Jesus she has been waiting her whole life for the Messiah to come and do the things Jesus is talking about. And it is right then that Jesus says, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” Ego eimi.” I am! Wonderful news of that sort turns your whole life upside down, or better yet, right side up. She came to the well with a jar to draw water. Finding the Messiah, she leaves her jar at the well, and runs to tell others. She leaves her jar behind because now she is carrying living water not in a jar, but within her very heart, within her very soul.

I guess that answers all the questions we have about this story, this story that ends with a crowded scene of conversion where the crowd at the scene exclaims with exultation, “This man really is the Savior of the world.” We have learned how the people of the town came to be at the crowded scene of conversion. We have learned how the disciples came to be at the crowded scene of conversion. We have learned how the woman came to be at the crowded scene of conversion. The only one present at the scene that we have not asked the question of is the one who matters most.

- How did Jesus come to be in this crowded scene of conversion?

The answer to how Jesus came to be in that crowded scene of conversion that culminated with the woman and the disciples and her townsfolk all proclaiming that Jesus is the Savior of the world might be the best part of this amazing gospel account. How did Jesus come to be there? He had to be there. What does that mean, he had to be there? John begins the account that is found in John chapter four, verses 4-42, with this powerful statement of purpose. “Jesus had to go through Samaria.” If you read any commentaries about this passage, from experts in

interpreting the bible, one of the first things you learn is that Jesus did not have to go through Samaria. On the way from Judea, where Jerusalem and the temple are, to Galilee, where Nazareth and Cana and Capernaum are, there are multiple paths. One of the most common took a person through Jericho and then up to Galilee. That path is a bit longer than the one Jesus took on his trip from Judea to Galilee, but for Jewish people that longer path had one distinct advantage. That path avoided going through Samaria. Oh, there it is again. The deep-seated animosity and distrust and disdain that was driven like a wedge between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus did not have to go through Samaria. But in the Gospel of John we are told Jesus had to go through Samaria. Think of that. Spend a moment and ponder deeply what John is telling us. For there to be a scene where Jewish disciples and Samaritan townsfolk and a woman who had suffered much pain and perhaps scandal all end up in a group photo, with the caption about the Christ that said, “We know that this man is the Savior of the world,” for all of that to happen, really, for any of that to happen, Jesus had to go through Samaria. And he did.

If you love those parables Jesus told about a shepherd leaving the 99 in the fold to seek out that one lost sheep...if a twinkle comes to your eye when Jesus tells of a woman scouring her house, moving couches and looking under tables to find one lost coin...and if you find your eyes welling up with tears and your heart racing with hope when Jesus tells of a Prodigal on his way to what we know will be a joy-filled homecoming...if you love those parables, then this story is for you. This is not a parable. When the Word who was with God in the beginning and through whom all things were made and who became flesh and dwelt among us, when Jesus wrapped himself in human flesh, when he carried a calendar that said, “Wedding in Cana”, and “Visit the Temple”, and “Answer when Nicodemus knocks”, when Jesus came to earth, there was a date written in the book of life that said, “Woman at the well.” It even had the time written in. Jesus had to be there. At noon. At high noon. Jesus had to be there to meet that one woman carrying a jar for water, that woman who was carrying a jar of water and who was also carrying a lifetime of hurt and rejection and failure and shame. Jesus had to be there.

In this one encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well, we find the Gospel of God's grace and mercy and love springing up like a well, becoming living water. It washes over the woman. It cascades on the crowd. It even drenches the disciples. And by the time this one episode in the life of Jesus concludes, we have a shining example of what we hope and believe will one day be true for all of creation. Jews and Samaritans...and Gentiles...and men and women...and people of different cultures...whose skins are different colors...whose tongues speak different languages...one day there will be a group photo with all of God's beloved children...and that Samaritan town will be there...and disciples of all the ages will be there...and that Samaritan woman will be there...and I believe with all my heart that you and I will be there. And all those whose lives are broken and who live under the glare of judgment and condemnation will be there. And all those who thirst, not for water from a well, but for living water...will be there. One day the sign will be for all God's beloved children. "We know that this man, this man named Jesus, is the Savior of the World."

Before we sing together a song with the very appropriate title, "The Savior of the World", just imagine the conversation that day at the well. Think of how you and I can be there, with Jesus, and with a woman who had no idea how close she was to receiving living water. Imagine Jesus saying to the woman, "If you knew who I was, you would ask me and I would give you living water." Imagine the woman saying words dripping with disappointment, "If you knew who I was, you would not offer." For all those who say to God, who say to Jesus, "If you knew who I was, you would not offer," I pray you will hear this story and know that there is something Jesus wants to say when he hears his precious children say those words of despair, "If you knew who I was you would not offer." Today, Jesus is saying to that Samaritan woman, and to all of us when our wells have run dry and our feelings of failure and unworthiness have drowned us in despair and disappointment, today for all who say to Jesus, "If you knew who I was you would not offer," hear Jesus saying, "I know who you are. I'm here today because I had to be here. You mean

so much to me, my precious child, that I had to be here. I had to be here because I love you so much I have given my very life so that you can have life. Receive my living water. Let it drench every disappointment, every defeat, every hurt, and every heartbreak. Let me become a spring inside you that wells up to eternal life.

Receive that gift today. And then squeeze your way into the group photo, with all the others whose lives have been rescued and redeemed by Jesus. Help lift up the sign, the one that says, “Now we know that man really is the Savior of the world.”