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The Woman at the Well

John 4:1–42 · Bloom · Ages 13–19

The woman at the well (Jn 4:1–42) is one of the best-crafted scenes in John's Gospel. It is a conversation in stages, in which a woman moves from suspicion to faith, and then brings a whole town with her.

The story: passing through Samaria, Jesus rests at Jacob's well at noon. A Samaritan woman comes for water. He asks her for a drink, crossing two lines at once, between Jew and Samaritan and between a man and a woman in public. He offers her living water, which becomes a spring of eternal life within. He shows that he knows she has had five husbands and that the man she has now is not her husband. She raises the question of where God should be worshiped; he speaks of worship in Spirit and truth. She speaks of the Messiah; he tells her that he is the Messiah. She leaves her jar, tells the town, and many believe, calling him the Savior of the world. Meanwhile Jesus tells the disciples that his food is doing the Father's will, and that the fields are ready for harvest.

Watch how she names him. First he is a Jew (4:9). Then 'Sir', greater than Jacob? (4:11–12). Then a prophet (4:19). Then possibly the Messiah (4:29). Finally the town calls him Savior of the world (4:42). Faith grows one step at a time, and Jesus is patient with every step.

Three things worth noticing.

God thirsts for us. Jesus begins by asking. The Catechism uses this scene to describe prayer: God's thirst meets ours, and he thirsts that we may thirst for him (CCC 2560–2561). Prayer is our answer to the God who came looking first.

Truth and mercy together. Jesus tells her the truth about her life, and he doesn't shame her. He even credits her for answering honestly (Jn 4:17–18). John gives no reasons for her five marriages, and we shouldn't invent any. Jesus simply lets her be fully known, and stays. Being known completely and loved anyway is what sets her free to run and tell her whole town.

Worship in Spirit and truth. This doesn't mean worship is purely inward or that places don't matter. Jesus himself worshiped in the Temple. It means that, with his coming, true worship is no longer tied to one mountain: it is offered in the Holy Spirit and through Christ, who is the Truth, wherever his people gather (CCC 1179). Jesus also says that salvation comes through the Jews (Jn 4:22). The Church honors that root (CCC 839).

Living water is a sign of the Holy Spirit, given in Baptism (CCC 694, 728). Early Christian art placed this scene in baptisteries, and the Church still reads it on the Third Sunday of Lent, in Year A, for those preparing for Baptism at Easter.

Finally, the first missionary to Samaria is this woman. She has no training, only an encounter. That is still how most people come to Christ.

Church teaching note

Church teaching: God's thirst and ours in prayer, drawn from this scene (CCC 2560–2561); water as a sign of the Holy Spirit (CCC 694); Jesus speaks of the Spirit to the Samaritan woman (CCC 728); worship in Spirit and truth and places of worship (CCC 1179); the Church's bond with the Jewish people (CCC 839). Samaritan history (Mount Gerizim), customs on speaking with women and sharing vessels, and baptistery art are historical context. Its use on the Third Sunday of Lent, Year A, for the scrutinies is liturgical context. Jn 7:37–39 is a cross-reference outside the retold passage.

Talk about it

1. Trace the names the woman uses for Jesus. What does that show about how faith grows?
2. How does Jesus hold together truth and mercy in this conversation?
3. What does 'worship in Spirit and truth' mean, and what does it not mean (CCC 1179)?
4. Who could you tell about an encounter with Jesus, the way she did?

Key verse: Jn 4:23–24. Look it up in your Bible.