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# At the Well

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 8 March 2026

Romans 5:1-11 • John 4:5-42

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The woman at the well in our wonderful (and long) story is confronted with a man she doesn't know. Then she learns that he's a prophet. Then she learns that he is the Messiah. Each step is a revelation which jolts her out of her accepted beliefs, but she continues to take the journey of discovery. Perhaps this is a model of the journey many of us take when we come to faith, or when we renew our faith as an adult, after falling away in our early adulthood, as many of us do. We try to see Jesus anew and to know him for what he is.

I know that I am continually trying to see Jesus. I don't mean in the flesh or as a vision. Those who saw him in person, like the woman at the well or his twelve disciples, were privileged indeed. I try to see Jesus in the sense of feeling his presence, and above all, of understanding what he wants from me, what he wants me to do, how he wants me to live. Sometimes he seems clear, and other times, the picture is a bit fuzzy.

I had an experience last week which made me think of this. I was at the dentist for a cleaning, and was lying back in the chair, watching TV. My dentist leans me way back until I'm lying flat, and she has a TV mounted on the ceiling to keep my mind off what she's doing in my mouth. The TV was showing travel images, beautiful scenes from around the world. On that day, it was showing scenes of Brazil. There were mountains and beaches and castles and that wonderful enormous statue of Jesus in Rio de Janeiro, high on the mountain above the city, with his arms outstretched. As I looked at Jesus the statue, my dentist leaned in a little closer to see something in my mouth, and the light she wears on her forehead partially blinded me. I could still see past the light to see Jesus on the screen, but he looked sort of hazy, the way things look when you're looking past a bright light, like when you're driving at night and a car comes towards you with bright hi-beams. Jesus looked a bit indistinct and faded, and I thought: this is how I often feel about Jesus. I know he is always there. I know he always loves me, and I know that I can always call on him. But sometimes when I'm praying, he doesn't come in too clear, and I'm not sure exactly what he wants of me.

Do you feel this way sometimes? I speak to Jesus in my prayers, and I pray that he will hear me. I know intellectually that he does hear me, but I don't always feel it until later, when something happens which is an answer to my prayers, and I have that feeling, or that realisation, that I needn't have worried; I was in good hands all along. Jesus' calming presence can always be found if we seek it. We have to open ourselves to Jesus to find that contact, for he will never force it on us.

In our Gospel, Jesus remains calm while he tells things to the woman at the well which completely change her world. She is used to worshipping in a certain place, Mount Gerizin, with the other Samaritans; and Jews of course worship in Jerusalem. But both things will change, as Jesus tells her that the way to worship the Father is in spirit; this is open to everyone, and so the divide between Jews and Samaritans will cease to be important. She has been waiting for the Messiah; and he is there in front of her. Her longstanding assumptions have been seriously challenged. She is astonished and she runs to tell her people about it.

Meanwhile, the disciples return, and they are challenged by Jesus' actions too. Jesus is talking to a woman, and not only a woman, but a Samaritan woman! In their society, this is simply not done — but their rabbi is doing it. They don't dare to say anything to Jesus, but they don't understand it. Their image of Jesus is changing. It has become less clear, in a way, as they doubt and revise their previous impressions; but Jesus is actually revealing more of himself as time goes on, and their image of him will become clearer and more correct.

This is what I like about this story. It reveals several things about Jesus:

- He is the Messiah — this had not yet been firmly established by this point in John's Gospel
- He does not distinguish between races or peoples the way people do, as we saw when he spoke of both Jews and Samaritans worshipping God in spirit
- He does not distinguish between male and female, speaking to the woman at the well as he would speak to anyone
- He wants his people to know him and to receive what he can bring them, as we see when he speaks of the living water
- He has been sent by his Father to complete his Father's work, and it is fulfilling to him — as he tells the disciples, it is his food

The disciples' image of Jesus will become clearer as they travel with him, and so will ours. We actually know many things about Jesus from the Bible accounts of his life. So why does he sometimes still seem hazy to me, as if my glasses were dirty, or something was blocking my view?

It can only be that *I* put up barriers. *I* am the one making Jesus fuzzy and indistinct. When I have more faith in my own decisions than in Jesus' counsel, I put up a barrier. When I think I can go my own way and I don't need help, I put up a barrier. When I forget even to pray to Jesus and ask for his help, I put up a barrier. So I have to keep reminding myself, as the song says, "Take it to the Lord in prayer." What a friend we have in Jesus! When I remember to do this, Jesus starts to come into focus again. Thanks be to God. Amen.