

Lent Three

Read

[John 4:5–42](#)

Text and Land

Sychar is a location on the edge of modern Nablus, and underneath a modern (and very large) Russian Orthodox Church the pilgrims come to draw water from Jacob's Well. As with many holy places in the biblical lands, the site has seen a succession of churches that were in turn destroyed by rival believers, or felled by earthquakes. An earthquake in 1927 destroyed the predecessor of the current church that is built on the foundations of a church from the Crusader period.

In this landscape a reliable well is a great blessing to any community fortunate to live nearby. In this case the well has been venerated for many centuries as the well of Jacob, direct ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The passage hints at religious conflict as Samaritans and Jews disagreed over the authority of both their leaders and their holy sites. Today a small Samaritan community continues to live on the adjacent Mt Gerazim, while the site of the well has been claimed—unsuccessfully so far—by Israeli settlers as a Jewish holy site. In November 1979 the custodian of the church was hacked to death by Jewish extremists and the church was ransacked.

In this place of conflict and religious rivalry, Jesus engages a Samaritan woman in conversation. This is one of those biblical stories in which the key character is a woman. This feisty woman evokes the spirit of the [Canaanite woman](#) in Mark 7:24-30/Matt 15:21-28. Both women engage Jesus directly and their stories are grounded in their personal histories as women and as outsiders (from a male Jewish perspective).

Questions for Discussion

- In the biblical tradition, wells often serve as places of encounter. What are the places in our culture where people have random but potentially significant encounters with strangers?
- Jesus crossed several cultural boundaries in this story. He engaged in conversation with a woman who was not a close relative. He also invited a Samaritan to recognize his identity and mission. He affirmed a deeper spiritual truth beyond both Jewish and Samaritan religions. As followers of this radical prophet, what cultural boundaries might the gospel require us to cross at this time?
- “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” How does this axiom impact your own spiritual practice?
- In Christianity, masculine imagery for the divine dominates our spiritual imagination. The most revered woman is a Virgin Mother, and hardly a role model for other women. This story offers a positive view of a woman as a paradigm of discipleship, and perhaps invites us to move beyond ‘family values’ to embrace a wider agenda of liberation and empowerment.

Prayer

*‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!
He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ (John 4. 29)*

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear.” Timothy Keller

Sit with Psalm 139. 1-18, and rest in the assurance that God knows you.

