

John 4:1–26, 39–42 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”²—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.”¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Reaching across boundaries to “others” takes real courage.

Why did Jesus have to go to Samaria (see v. 4)? That verse never caught my eye before. Why emphasize that Jesus *had* to go there? Perhaps because Samaria was “enemy territory,” people with whom devout Jews wouldn’t share a meal. When Jews traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem, they traveled down the Jordan River valley so they could avoid the despised Samaritans.

We, like the ancient Jews and all peoples, tend to be quite skilled at erecting boundaries around groups of people. Like the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37, the

shock (at least to the Jews) in this story is built on the fact that it is the hated Samaritans, of all people, who are the first to flock to Jesus, proclaiming him “Savior of the world.” This story tears down such ethnic boundaries. It also tears down barriers between men and women. Jesus doesn’t care that he is speaking to a woman alone – or perhaps he has picked her for that very reason. In the gospels, you can always count on Jesus’ inviting in the people we’d think would be the last ones to be invited.

So, this is a story of courage. Jesus traveling through Samaria and talking with this unnamed woman. And the woman herself who introduced Jesus to her fellow Samaritans. Here is their story.

At the well

Traveling through Samaria, Jesus comes to a well in the middle of the day. A woman is there. At the well at noon? Alone? Something is wrong with this picture. Women went to the well in the cool of the morning or the evening, but not at noon. Yet, there she is.

Though no one outside the village would know why the woman is there at noon, Jesus knows. But he soon fills the woman’s head with questions of her own. Jesus asks her for water, though Jews avoided Samaritans and would never drink from their cup or eat from their plate. And he is a man. It was very improper for a Jewish man to be seen alone with any woman and unthinkable that he should speak with her. All this surely set her head spinning. We quickly see that there is something very odd going on. N. T. Wright elaborates on this:

For a start, Jesus was known already as a holy man, leading a movement to bring Israel back to God. (John’s readers know that he is more than that, but we must learn to think with the minds of his followers at the time.) In that culture, many devout Jewish men would not have allowed themselves to be alone with a woman. If it was unavoidable that they should be, they would certainly not have entered into conversation with her. The risk, they would have thought, was too high—risk of impurity, risk of gossip, risk ultimately of being drawn into immorality. And yet Jesus is talking to this woman. Later in the chapter John shows how startled the disciples were by this (4:27).

Second, the woman is of course a Samaritan. Ever since some of the Jewish exiles had come back from Babylon, to find that the central section of their ancient territory was occupied by a group who claimed to be the true descendants of Abraham, and who opposed their return, there had been constant trouble. Sometimes it had broken out into actual skirmishes, with bloodshed and murder. But mostly it was simply a matter of not mixing. The Jews wouldn’t have anything to do with the Samaritans. They would, especially, not share eating and drinking vessels with them. And yet Jesus is asking this woman for a drink.

Third, compounding both of these problems, the woman is obviously a bad character. The normal time for women to visit the well, set as it was at some distance from the town, would be at a cooler time of day, most likely first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. This woman has come at the time when she is least likely to meet anyone—at least, anyone who knows her, her past and her immoral lifestyle. The last thing she would want would be to rub shoulders with the other women of the town, and they would feel the same about her. Jesus will presently show that he knows all about this. And yet he engages her in conversation—conversation with a teasing, double-meaning flavor to it.¹

Then Jesus begins to talk with her about some kind of water that forever banishes thirst and has something to do with eternal life. Who could blame her for focusing on the straight-forward possibility of never having to carry water from the well again.

Next, we learn why she is there at mid-day when no one else comes to the well. She has had five husbands and is currently living with a man to whom she is not even married. She

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (40–41). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

comes at noon to avoid the smirks and snickers of the other women in the village. She lives a lonely life, socially cut-off in a world driven by family and community. She is, in a word, an outcast.

Not surprisingly, she quickly gets over her astonishment that Jesus knows these things about her and tries to change the subject. Isn't that so like us all. When we get close to the heart of the matter, when we begin talking about something that makes us uncomfortable, we try to shift the conversation elsewhere.

The woman begins to talk about worship, especially the "where" of worship. I guess that shouldn't surprise us either. We can get pretty caught up in the importance of this spot of land or that one, in one building or another. Certainly, Jesus' fellow Jews were often so focused on the importance of "The Land," that they failed to see God's working in all the world. So, Jesus tries to help her see that worship is not about the "where" but the "who." What matters is not where the woman worships, on the mountain or in Jerusalem, but that she worship the one true God. And as we learn in John's gospel, that one true God is revealed fully only in Jesus Christ.

The obvious question is what or whom do you and I worship? N.T. Wright is on the mark when he says that we become like what we worship. Worship money and we become greedy. Worship sex and we become lustful. But worship the LORD God and we become Christlike. And as the story proceeds, the woman and many of her fellow Samaritans come to embrace Jesus as the "who." Indeed, it is Samaritans, not Jews, who proclaim Jesus to be not merely the Messiah but to be the "Savior of the world" (4:42).

Does Jesus say
"I am he" or "I am"?

In verse 25 of the story of the Samaritan woman, you'll see that she ends the conversation about worship with a sort of "we'll see." The Messiah will come someday, she says, and answer all these questions. In response, Jesus says, in the NRSV and NIV translations, "I am he," staking claim to messiahship. Yet the Greek doesn't say, "I am he," it says "I am" (*ego eimi*). The CEB translators chose to translate the Greek simply as "I am," even going so far as to capitalize the "am."

This phrase (*ego eimi*) comes up so often in John's gospel that it is hard to believe that John wants us to see nothing more than self-identification here. "I am" is the name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. God is the great I AM. When Jesus responds, "*ego eimi*," it is a bold connection with the divine name. Later in the gospel, when arresting officers ask Jesus whether he is Jesus of Nazareth, he again responds "*ego eimi*" – and everyone falls to the ground. They understand the larger meaning of Jesus' response.

Saved for?

John's gospel is built on a series of encounters. Person after person meets Jesus and the questions are always the same: Who is Jesus and what is their response? Some believe² and some don't.

The Samaritan woman believes. We don't really know why. Is it Jesus' knowing things he can't know? Or does she see in Jesus, the Word? Regardless, she goes and tells others her good news, and they believe. Her salvation is not merely for her sake, but for the sake of her neighbors, even the whole world.

Indeed, these Samaritans are so excited that they ask Jesus to stick around and he does, for two days, during which time "many more believed because of his word" (4:41). No longer is their believing the result of the woman's testimony, but because of what they hear for themselves. Bear in mind that the woman has saved no one; that is God's work, using her testimony.

Because these people were Samaritans, despised by the Jews, it is easy for us to grasp that when Jesus offers this woman new life, he is offering it to all. Though Jesus is a Jew, his vocation is for the whole world. This story echoes John the Baptist's exclamation when he

²The word "believe (believed/believing)" is used in John nearly 100 times! It translates the Greek verb form of the word "faith/*pistis*." It would be better if we said "faithing," but we've lost the verb form of "faith" in the English language, so we use "believing" instead. In John, the noun "faith" is never used, the emphasis is completely on the action – trusting in, believing in, Jesus.

sees Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29). In Christ, we discover the God whom we are to worship. And it is in Jesus that some Samaritans discovered the God they worshipped.

The fruits of courage

One of the most striking features of today’s story is that it is Samaritans who are the first to really “get it.” They believe his word; they believe him. Not his astounding feats, to which the Jewish crowds have been drawn, but to Jesus’ words.

The Samaritans have heard and believed and, hence, understood that Jesus is not merely a Jewish Messiah, but the “Savior of the world,” echoing Jesus’ own words to Nicodemus: “For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (3:17).

Though so many in John’s gospel can’t see the truth about Jesus, some do. Unbelief need not be a permanent disease. There is a cure. But embracing the cure inevitably is an act of faith, of having the courage to trust.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

A study of the book of Exodus

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Ephesians

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj’s.-- we’re on-line now so who’d even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, “Scott Engle”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

This class is not meeting on January 31, as Scott is preaching in the 9:30 traditional service.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.