

A 3 Lent 2026
Saint Barnabas Church, Falmouth MA
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March 8, 2026

John 4: 5-42

Halfway through our Lenten season, we encounter a Gospel story which, at first blush, does not seem too Lenten—no combating Diabolus in the wilderness, no Cross on the horizon

In the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, found only in John's Gospel, we experience a masterful combination of literary drama and theological witness to Jesus as the living water

John plays on the dynamic tension between water as basic human necessity and 'living water' as the conduit to eternal life, adding cross-cultural boundary tension between Jew and Samaritan for added drama

All who thirst for righteousness, all who live in isolation because of our sin and want to be seen and known by Christ will respond to Jesus' loving, penetrating knowledge of the woman at the well

As we unpack this story, let's first compare it to Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, which we heard last Sunday and immediately precedes the Samaritan woman in John's Gospel

We find stark contrasts between this week's Samaritan woman and last Sunday's Nicodemus

First, Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin and, thus, highly respected, whereas the Samaritan woman is a distrusted 'other' – a

Samaritan, a woman, and one who has had two husbands more than the Jewish limit of three

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, embodies the epitome of strict morality, whereas the woman is living in a non-sanctioned relationship

The encounter with Nicodemus takes place in the dark of night, whereas Jesus meets the woman at high noon, in the heat of the day

Perhaps the most important contrast, however, is that Nicodemus responds to Jesus with caution and ambivalence (we don't know if he ever proclaims Jesus as Messiah), whereas the woman's heart is converted in relation to Jesus, and she becomes a powerful evangelist to her friends

The life-giving theme of water flows through today's story and provides both its literary power and theological witness

As the story opens, Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for water and immediately violates cultural norms and boundaries

The sassy woman with a textured backstory fails to recognize Jesus and mocks him for being thirsty and socially challenged

Jesus immediately engages the woman and shows that the real reason for his action is not bodily need, but his divine status as one who delivers the living water

Like so many of us, the woman sees the mundane in the miraculous, mistaking temporary satiation of the body for permanent connection of the soul

As Jesus continues to connect with her—notice, without any derision for her human denseness or cultural otherness—she comes to recognize the power of Jesus and the saving truth to which he points

As she taps into the waters of salvation, her life is transformed and she immediately begins sharing the Good News with others, never hoarding it for herself

Jesus takes the initiative in this conversion story, and his loving gaze pierces her soul

Jesus names the woman's pain and textured life

At this vulnerable point, we hold our breath and wonder whether the woman will become defensive and full of self-serving rationalizations, or whether she will tell this stranger to mind his own business: will she turn her back on the light symbolized by high noon?

Thankfully, the woman beholds Jesus as prophet and then comes to understand his fuller nature as a loving Messiah who knows us, judges us in love, and seeks our transformation to discipleship

In her transformation, the woman does not grovel, distort or suck up to her Savior; rather, she allows Jesus' penetrating gaze to capture her heart and set her on a new path toward a transfigured life

This encounter gives us the drama of a soul struggling to rise from things of this world—here, bodily thirst and 'intimacy needs'—to an eternal salvation—the living water—from which we can love God and transform our earthly relationships

What does Jesus really mean by 'living water' and what might it have to do with our own spiritual journeys today?

More than other Gospel writers, John understands this 'living water' on two levels simultaneously, and so should we

First, 'living water' points to Jesus' revelation or teaching; in keeping with the wisdom tradition of Israel, Jesus embodies the divine wisdom that supplants the law, as Paul understood so well in our passage from Romans

As John's witness embodies so much more powerfully than Matthew, Mark or Luke, the 'living water' of Jesus' revelation parallels the symbols of Jesus as the light and as the bread of life

Secondly, and simultaneously, the 'living water' embodies the Spirit that is communicated by Jesus

Jesus invokes the Spirit to all believers, and he provides a foretaste to the outcast woman who comes to find faith in him

When she lets down her street-wise defenses and drinks of the 'living water' she becomes transformed by the Spirit and proclaims Jesus to her friends

She tastes eternal life—a term invoked twice in our story, a term John uses far more than others, a term embracing God's full and transforming presence in our lives, right here and now

Here at St. Barnabas, we strive to witness God's 'living water' breaking down sinful, human boundaries that get in the way of faithful, Christian community via the arts and by speaking truth to power

As St. Paul understood better than perhaps any other, when we live into our justification and feel God's love poured into our hearts (a parallel image for 'living water') we begin to see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ more than as Jew or Gentile, male or female, liberal or conservative, gay or straight, married or single

Our common baptismal identity trumps human constructs like gender, introvert, extrovert, happy, sad, etc.

Certainly, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan takes place before the Cross, and Paul's witness flows from it, but from both sides of the Cross, Christ's love breaks down the petty divisions of the ungodly

When we allow Christ's gaze to pierce our hearts, when we tap into the 'living waters', when we ask God to forgive our sins as we forgive the sins of others, then we break down the artificial walls of Jew/Samaritan, evangelical/catholic, and so on

In the context of today's cultural psychosis, our witness to a Savior who breaks down artificial constructs while offering the hope of transformed life takes on more palpable urgency

Like the Israelites murmuring in the wilderness, we all have our bad-hair days that fill us with fantasies of mutinous rage, but this should be the exception, not the rule, as we drink of 'living water'

Living water provides a refreshing antidote and gentle critique to our so-called cultural wars and online screaming fests

As our Tuesday contemplative prayer group is witnessing, stillness and silence before God can speak louder than words

Half-way through our Lenten journey, one of 40 days and not 40 years, I invite you to thirst after righteousness and quench that thirst in the living water of Christ

At the outset, I said today's story does not, at first blush, seem too Lenten, yet a deeper look embraces the Lenten call for metanoia—the opposite of paranoia—for turning around to a new life of transformation and joy

Even as we walk with Jesus and prepare to commemorate his Passion, I invite you to embrace your justification that has been bought by Christ

In doing so, know that Jesus' suffering produces our endurance, and that our endurance produces Christ-like character, which itself begets hope, forgiveness and reconciliation.