

If I was asked to select one story that shows us the most about who Jesus is, it would be the one we just heard from the Gospel of John. A passage for a preaching life and a lifetime of preaching.

We need the well and the water in it, and the bucket to draw it up, and the man sitting beside us, telling us everything we have ever done. The story gives us so many moments of recognition.

The first task is simply to feel our emptiness, and drink. Feel ourselves coming to the well and meeting the stranger – who asks us for a drink. Feel ourselves muttering about messiahs with no buckets, so that we have to do all the work. Feel ourselves dry and empty and with no good word – to preach or to live.

Then as our buckets go down into the well and the stranger continues to talk, feel ourselves drawn into his words, just as surely as if they were a well of water themselves, until their coolness splashes over our faces and we come to know who this stranger is.

There are many ways to let down your bucket into this text. Here are some to try

1. notice that Jesus initiates.

There are always good reasons for Jesus *not* to talk with us. This time, it is because the person at the well is a woman and a Samaritan: double jeopardy. We could add a few more reasons to steer clear, based on textual inferences: a shady past, a questionable reputation, a scorching verbal dexterity.

Jesus breaks rules to talk with her. His friends are shocked. Human beings are, by definition, grounded in social contexts and ordered by those realities. While Jesus has a distinct fondness for overstepping boundaries. A fondness of overstepping boundaries constructed to protect ourselves, to save ourselves. Which often only succeed at limiting ourselves. What traditions or customs or conventions might Jesus have to cross in order to speak with you?

2. notice that it is Jesus who is thirsty.

The walk through Samaria is long and tiring. Jesus sits down by the well while his disciples go to buy food in the village; this is where he and the woman meet. It ought to be easy for a thirsty man to get a drink at a well, but notice that Jesus cannot do this by himself. He asks the woman to give him a drink, giving her the chance to recognise the face of Christ in a stranger.

There is something beautifully simple in the staging of this scene as well as its premise: Jesus is thirsty at the well, and we are the ones with the bucket. We have the opportunity to recognise Christ in a stranger.

The deeper metaphorical conversation that follows makes no sense until we really take this in. Can a little thing like a cup of cool water, offered in love, be the beginning of a salvation journey?

3. notice the order of recognition: the prophet, then Messiah

Our attention is often grabbed by something which stands out as unfamiliar to our ways and our thoughts - a healing, an exorcism, a reading of someone else's mind.

Jesus pulls a few details about the woman's life out of thin air, and she is greatly impressed  
"Sir, I see that you are a prophet."

Maybe she needed to confront the supernatural power of the man before she could see the messianic truth. Maybe we all do.

The mighty acts of God are wondrous to behold and difficult to ignore: the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world is something else entirely. It requires another look before we can begin to comprehend. Maybe the prophet is like the cup of cool water: the visible manifestation of a deeper reality.

#### 4. Notice what is said as well as not said

When the woman comes to the startling recognition that she has been speaking with the Messiah, she leaves her bucket and runs to the village with the news. When the woman returns to her village, she evokes the very words that Jesus says to his first disciples,

"Come and see".

Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did ... and loved me anyway.

These last four words are not written in the Gospel yet are written in every beat of her heart as she runs. Going into the village, the woman invites her fellow townspeople to their own encounter with Jesus.

She responds to Jesus in a way that leads Jesus to reveal his true identity to her; in doing so, she sees her own identity to evolve.

Jesus reveals his very real truth to the woman. 'I am,' he says, the very presence of God before her. This is the first absolute 'I Am' statement in the Gospel of John. The last absolute 'I am' statement will cause Roman soldiers to fall to the ground.

We learn from the Samaritan woman that in our own encounters with Jesus, we are not only changed, what God reveals to us changes as well.

The scene that follows replicates Jesus' calling of the first disciples. Jesus "stays" with the Samaritans, as did the first disciples, which is a fundamental category of relationship for the fourth Gospel. The relationship of abiding. Remaining. Being there ... together. At a well, on the mount, in a boat, at a supper, in a garden, on a cross. At a tomb. In a life.

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*Wendy*