

Thirsting for More – John 4 – March 19, 2017

Dear diary – you’re not going to believe what happened to me today. The day started out like any other. I watched the women head out to the well early this morning, and I waited until they had all come back before I set out. It’s easier that way. I don’t have to pretend I can’t see the smirks tossed my direction. I don’t have to listen to the whispers or the giggling. It’s not like I don’t know what they’re gossiping about. Like I had any choice.

Five husbands gone. The first had died, then his brother divorced me when I couldn’t conceive a child. After that, the pickins were pretty slim. Damaged goods, they called me. I had to take what I could get, didn’t I? After all, a woman can’t survive on her own. No family to care for me, no friends to offer me solace or support. All my life, I have always dreamed of more. Kindness, love, companionship. I kept hoping. I kept searching. I kept praying. Jonas is little more than a stranger. Someone to provide protection. Not much else.

So, when the sun was at its highest, I set out, knowing I would be alone. I’m always alone. I could journey to Jacob’s Well in my sleep. The same trip every day, the same dreary chore. Head down, eyes on the ground, hoping to avoid any human contact. My skin is thick now, but its best to avoid the pain altogether. Just another reminder of my emptiness. And so I made my way.

But then I could hear them coming. I looked up and sighed with frustration and a bit of fear. It was a group of men. I counted about a dozen. They were travelers. I could see that by their dusty robes and haggard expressions. And then I noticed something odd. These men were Jews! Were they lost? I tried to make myself as small as possible as they passed me on the road. Fortunately, they ignored me. I was a Samaritan woman, after all. Not worth their time or effort.

When I arrived at the well, I paused for a moment. There was another one. A Jewish man, resting next to the well. I desperately hoped there would be no trouble. I needed that water. My parched tongue reminded me of my need. And that man blocked my way. He heard my approach and gazed up at me. I steeled myself for his curses, yet none came. I dared not look at him, but I couldn’t help noticing his kind face. His gentle voice asked me for water. He had no bucket of his own, but I was astonished he would even consider asking me – a woman, a Samaritan. Did he not know of the hatred between our people? The restrictions against men speaking to women in public?

But I couldn’t help responding, and thus he engaged me in the strangest conversation I have ever experienced. He offered me something that he called living water, something that was a gift of God. I was intrigued by this notion, yet wondered how he would draw this water with no bucket. Did he think himself greater than our ancestor Jacob?

Then he spoke the most astonishing words. The water that he offered would quench all thirst, would in fact bubble up inside a person as a stream to eternal life. That sounded like some pretty good water. I wanted some of that. Imagine, never being thirsty again. Never having to come to this well at the hottest part of the day to avoid the taunts and stares of others. Never having to feel ashamed.

As if he could read my mind, he told me to get my husband. Here it comes, I thought. He's just like the rest. The feeling of humiliation began to rise up in my body. I admitted that I had no husband. I waited, expecting the worst. Yet instead of reviling me, he simply stated my condition as a fact. It was as if he could read my soul. He somehow understood my longing, could sense my unquenchable thirst for something – something that would make me whole. I had believed that if I could just find the right man....yet, that never worked. And he seemed to know that.

A thought came to me. He had to be a prophet. Only a prophet could know a person like that. I quickly started talking theology. Prophets always want to talk about theology, don't they? Besides he was starting to get a little too personal, and I really didn't want to talk about that. He understood my longing. He understood my desire to fill up the hole I felt within myself. And he seemed to think I was looking in the wrong places to quench that particular thirst. Yep, getting a little too much up in my business.

And so I posed my theological digression, hoping to change the subject. Yet he easily sidestepped my argument. He spoke about worshipping God as if he really knew God. A realization began to dawn in my mind. What if he is the one? What if this is the Messiah that we have awaited for so long? Could it be? Could it possibly be him? So I asked him. And he said yes. He was the one.

The group of men that I had passed earlier out on the road arrived at the well. I understood. They were his men, coming back to him from an errand into town. I took this opportunity to quietly slip away. I left my water jar. Unfilled. Unneeded. Who needs water? Who needs water when an eternal spring has bubbled up within one's soul?

Dear Father, I am learning much on my journeys with Jesus. I know you never understood how I could just drop my fishing nets, leave our home and family, and follow some preacher from Nazareth. But he really is something special.

These past few days have been rather strange. I've seen some things I never thought I'd see. And I am coming to understand some things that never made sense before. We were journeying back to Galilee after time spent in Judea. Instead of going around, Jesus wanted to travel through Samaria. I remembered my lessons. I knew that Jews weren't supposed to associate with Samaritans. I knew that Samaria was to be avoided, but I kept silent when Jesus chose this path. We all kept silent.

When we approached the city of Sychar, we rested for a bit, here at Jacob's Well. Jesus sent us ahead to purchase food. We had no trouble in town. A few strange looks from the locals, but everyone kept a civil tongue. The merchants were wary, but friendly. I was surprised. I wonder if perhaps our impressions of Samaritans were inaccurate. I know we have had our religious differences over the centuries. I know that we consider them unclean, since they are descended from Jews who had intermarried with Gentiles during the Babylonian exile. But I wonder.

Once we got the food needed for the journey, we headed back out of the city back to the well. As we arrived, all conversation stopped, our mouths hanging open in shock and bewilderment. I wondered if it were a mirage, because I saw Jesus speaking with a Samaritan woman! I know what you're thinking – we were all thinking it. Samaritan. Woman. Has Jesus gone completely mad? I don't know how many laws he broke during that conversation, but none of us were about to question him.

Fortunately, the woman departed quickly after our arrival, though she left her water jar behind. We tried to ignore what we had witnessed. Several of the disciples hurried over to Jesus with the food we had purchased. He had sent us for food, after all, so he must be hungry. But he declined, saying he had food that we didn't know about. Did that woman give him some food, I wondered? Surely he wouldn't eat after her! Talking is one thing, but...

Jesus went into preacher mode and began to teach us. It was strange. A lot of what he teaches us seems strange, at least at first. He used metaphors about harvesting crops. We understood farming – planting and harvesting. That much made sense to us. But he was saying that these people, these Samaritans, were supposed to be part of the harvest. Part of God's harvest. Part of God's family. His message is not just for us Jews. His message is also for these Samaritans.

That's hard to swallow. I'm not sure what to think about that. Samaritans are unclean, they have weird religious beliefs, and they do things differently than we do. But I'm trying to keep an open mind. At least he hasn't said anything about the Romans being part of the harvest. Now, that would be crazy indeed! At least these people were related to us.

I don't know, Father. We think he might be the Messiah. Sometimes his teachings are hard to understand. But his words, his message. I can't explain it, really. What he says seems to reach deep inside me. It's like hearing and comprehending truth for the very first time. He brings out the best in me, and when I'm around him, I want to be my best.

I need to end this letter. A large group of Samaritans just arrived here at the well. It looks like we're getting ready to move. Shalom, your beloved son.

I am a respected merchant. I have a profitable produce shop here on the main drag in town. I offer produce from all over the region, and from beyond. It's a fascinating profession. I never get bored. I see all types of people. I hear the juiciest gossip. Nothing surprises me anymore. But today? Today caught my attention.

About noontime I saw her heading out to the well, water jar in hand. I almost feel sorry for the poor thing. Almost. But I don't waste a lot of my pity on loose women. Heck, I don't even know if the stories are true. But how the rumors do fly! If I recall correctly, she stopped going early to the well a few years back, maybe 1 or 2 husbands ago? I imagine the gibes by the ladies got rather pointed. And so she fetches her water in solitude, in the hottest part of the day.

I figured it was about time for me to take a break, most folks take a breather when it's this hot. So I sat back in the shade in front of my shop and rested my eyes for a moment. But then I heard voices. Galileans, by the sound of their accents. Now what on earth would bring a passel of Jewish boys into this fine Samaritan city? I, of course, was beyond the local animosities. Their coins spend just as easily as ours.

They didn't waste much time with small talk. Seemed rather uncomfortable, truth be told. They made their purchases and moved on quickly to the baker's stall. I resumed my position of comfort and napped for a while.

An hour or so later, I awakened to a commotion. Our resident floozy was back in town and was stirring up a crowd. I slowly got up from my seat and eased away from my shop into the crowd that was forming around her, to hear what she had to say. I quickly noticed a change. No more did her face wear that defeated expression. Her eyes were blazing with excitement – the dullness of shame and humiliation were all gone. I chuckled to myself. Maybe she finally found her true love down at the well. Little did I know.

Her voice was animated as she told her story to everyone who would listen. Men, women, children – they all gathered around her. Many were simply curious by her unexpected enthusiasm. But then people started to come away with wonder in their own eyes. People began talking to one another. They gathered in small groups. They were saying, could this be true? Could she really have seen... him?

I pushed through the crowd to get a little closer. Then I heard the word that stopped me dead in my tracks. Messiah. No way. That cannot be. I gave up listening to those religious fairy stories ages ago. I was a thinking man. I was a working man, an entrepreneur. I made my own way in the world. I was the master of my own destiny and I certainly didn't need any gods telling me what to do...and yet...though I tried to keep it buried, tried to cover it with wealth and possessions and worldliness...there was still within me, a thirst. A longing. Something deep inside that needed to be satisfied. And if I was honest with myself, nothing in this world seemed to ever come close.

Then amid this rising din of voices I heard someone shout, "Let's go see for ourselves!" and they began hurrying out toward Jacob's Well. This was big news. The biggest ever. I glanced back at my shop, wondering if I should close up. What if the looting began? What if someone came and stole my produce? What if someone grabbed my money pouch? That's my livelihood.

But. What if? What if that man really was the Messiah?

I hefted my robes and began running after the crowd.