

“The Water” - The Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4)
adapted from [Inspired by Rachel Held Evans](#)

I went to the well at noon.

Sun burning my neck, sweat stinging my eyes, I sighed to think how much heavier that water jar would seem on the journey back. Most of the women gather at first light, their laughter carrying over the countryside like birdsong as they gossip and banter.



In the desert, wells give and draw life, their waters evocative of the womb. Wells are where our ancestors arranged marriages, fell in love, and received word of impending births. Wells are where God starts something new.

I was not a woman who belonged at a well.

This spring was named for Jacob, but as I trudged toward it, I thought of Tamar, as I often did. Tamar, the original cursed woman, passed from brother to brother, bearing no children, bringing nothing but death, until finally, through lurid means, she gave that family twins and our people a nation. I saw myself in her story, for I too lived in my father-in-law's house, waiting for a little boy to become a man. That boy's mother had every reason to fear me, to hate me. After four weddings and four tragedies, I cannot blame her.

As the sun beat down light a great unseeing eye overhead, I saw a figure seated at the well. A man. I grew closer, spied the knotted tassels on his coat confirming he was a Jew, and felt a rush of relief. *Good. We won't have to talk.* A man in this country rarely speaks to a woman. A Jew to a Samaritan? Never.

At last I reached the well, collapsing on the other side to catch my breath. Somewhere a hawk screeched, her eyes, no doubt, on those field mice.

“Will you give me a drink?”

His voice startled me. For a moment, I doubted I'd heard it. What sort of Jew asked a Samaritan for water? They believed even our pitchers were unclean.

“You are a Jewish man, and I am a Samaritan woman,” I said with a laugh, wary of meeting his eyes. “And you're asking me for water?”

"If you knew who I was," he answered, "you'd be asking *me* for a drink, and I would give you fresh, flowing water. I would give you the kind of water you really crave."

Now he had my attention. The man was young, maybe thirty. He had no jar, rope, or buckets. He must have been traveling from Judea to Galilee.

"Artesian water from this well?" I pressed. "Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw tih, and this well is deep. Are you saying you are better than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it? Are you saying you know something he didn't?"

Jews were so smug about religion. No doubt this man never dreamed a Samaritan woman thought of such things.

"Everyone who drinks water from this well will get thirsty again," he said. "But whoever drinks the water I offer will remain satisfied, for they will have a gushing spring inside of them that never runs dry."

"Well then give me some of that water!" I laughed, playing along. "Then I won't have to hike out to this well every day."

The man fell silent. Assuming I'd offended him, I prepared my bucket and lowered it into the well.

"Go, call your husband and come back," he said, breaking the silence.

My jaw clenched.

"I have no husband," I said.

"Indeed you don't. You've had five husbands, haven't you? And the man you live with now is not one of them."

Five.

This man knew more than what local gossip could carry. He knew my secret. He knew *me*.

Shaking, I let the rope slip. My bucket plunged into the water, and I staggered backward.

"I see you are a prophet," I said, sitting down.

The man said nothing in reply, so for a while we just sat there together under the sun, sweating and thirsty, a strange understanding growing between us. He went to the well and pulled the bucket up.

“So tell me something,” I said, recovering my courage. “Samaritans say the place of rightful worship is that mountain over there, but Jews say it is in Jerusalem. Who is right?”

It may seem a strange thing to ask a prophet who has just laid your life bare, naming the thing you never dared to voice out loud, but if God was speaking to me through a Jew, I had some questions. The enmity between our people stretched back centuries. Time and geography had given us different cultures, different practices, different sacred places.

The Jews destroyed our temple on Mount Gerizim a hundred years before I was born, then banned us from worshiping in Jerusalem. If this man was a prophet, it meant righteousness belonged to the Jews. And if righteousness belonged to the Jews, a woman like me had no place to meet God.

“Don’t worry about that,” he answered, a smile in his voice. “Salvation will come through the Jews, yes, but it will be for all people. The day is coming when all the barriers between us will collapse. God is Spirit, after all, and Truth. You can’t build a temple around Spirit. You can’t lock Truth in a shrine. The kind of worship God wants is the kind of worship without walls.”

He paused. “But you know that already, daughter, don’t you? You have known all along.”

He crouched down and looked me straight in the eyes, seeing me in a way no man had ever seen me before.

“They say a Messiah will come and make all these things plain,” I ventured from the ground.

“I--the one speaking to you--am he.”

At that, he handed me the bucket of water. I brought it to my lips, lifted my head, and drank deep of the coolest, richest water I ever tasted. I drank and drank and drank. I drank until I could no longer breathe.

When I finished, I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and handed the bucket back to the man, who, to my amazement, threw his head back and gulped the rest of it down, dousing his dusty face with the last splash that remained. For a moment, I doubted what I’d just witnessed. This man, this Jew--this *Messiah*--drank from my defiled cup. And with relish.

He saw my surprise and laughed, the deep belly laugh of a man who sees our religious absurdities for what they are. I joined him, all the tired and thirsty cells in my body awake with life once again. It was like giving birth and being born at the same time.

