

January 21: John 4

The first 3 chapters of John assert that the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah necessitates a radical transformation of the established system of Judaism. This comes up again and again through Jesus' conflicts and discussions with the religious elite (the Pharisees, the Sadducees, "the Jews" which indicates the Jewish religious authorities). In chapter 4, that theme is expanded even further to indicate that through the revelation of Jesus as Messiah, the "half-breed, heretical" Samaritans are gathered into God's family through their faith in and acceptance of Jesus (a faith that is perhaps even more pronounced than that of their Jewish counterparts in the previous chapters). This chapter presents a contrast between the confused, secret curiosity of Nicodemus in chapter 3, and the enthusiastic faith and bold evangelism of the simple Samaritan woman in chapter 4.

Vs. 1-29, This chapter starts with Jesus travelling from Judea back to Galilee, for there is conflict brewing because Jesus' disciples are baptizing more than John. Everything about this chapter is steeped in "divine necessity", or "God's will." There are no such thing as coincidences in the Bible (or in our own lives). There is no geographical reason that the group HAD to travel through Samaria, but God's will to share the revelation of Christ with the Samaritans made it happen. Around noontime, Jesus is weary from travelling all day, so they stop in an unknown Samaritan village. This is a surprisingly human portrayal of Jesus, given the "high Christology" of the gospel of John (John often focusses more on the divine aspect of Jesus' nature than on his humanity, whereas Mark focusses more on Jesus' humanity and less on his divinity). The Well is the place where marriage proposals often happened in the famous stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs between the weary traveler and the beautiful woman of the city. The Samaritan woman comes to the well at a strange time –water would never have been drawn in the heat of the noonday sun. Some scholars have speculated that she had to come at that time because the other women had shunned her because of her sinful lifestyle, this is speculation and not rooted in any biblical witness. Perhaps she woke up not feeling well, or her child was sick, or she had a more pressing matter to attend to in the morning? Through some divine orchestration, this woman and Jesus end up at the well at the same time. And Jesus asks her for a drink of water. This would have been akin to a white person asking a drink of water from the same drinking vessel of a black person in the antebellum or Jim Crow south. This is why the woman is surprised and perhaps even suspicious. Is this a sinister joke? In response, Jesus calls his presence with her God's gift to her, and offers her living water (the source of life found only in Jesus). Water bubbling up from an underground spring symbolizes the life-giving power and eternal life found in relationship with Jesus. Trust in Jesus satisfies our needs in a way that material things cannot. Beginning in verse 16, Jesus gives her the living water by sharing with her a sign of his omniscience to gain her trust in him as the Messiah. Jesus tells her the history of her personal life. Some scholars have named this passage as describing her sin, but perhaps this woman is a tragic figure. Perhaps she's been widowed 5 times and had to turn to prostitution to support herself? Regardless of whether this passage places her in a life of sin or a life of tragedy, the important thing is that this extraordinary knowledge of Jesus inspires her faith in him. She believes him to be a prophet, so she questions him next about the most significant theological difference between Jews and Samaritans –is God to be worshipped in Jerusalem or on Mt.

Gerazim? Jesus responds that the hour is coming (Pentecost) when the place of worship will not matter, for God's spirit will be poured out on all flesh, and God will be freely available to all people in all places. Jesus confesses to this Samaritan woman that he is the Messiah she's been waiting for. In response to this experience with Jesus, the woman leaves her water jar (she no longer needs it, for she's now filled to the brim with living water), and she tells anyone in the city who will listen "Come and See!" Could I have found the Messiah? And in response to her testimony, those who heard her went and found Jesus at the well to have their own experiences with him.

Vs. 31-54, Continuing the theme of "those who should understand, don't" the disciples misunderstand Jesus' metaphorical language ("I have food to eat that you do not know about.") so Jesus clarifies, saying that his food (that which fulfills him) is to do the will of the Father and to complete that work (death and resurrection). Again, Jesus' very presence in this Samaritan village is a sign of God's will for his revelation to the Samaritans. Vs. 36-38 likely describes the dynamic of Jesus and his disciples stepping in to harvest the seeds that were sown by John's ministry. How often do we enter into the labor of those who have gone before us? So many Samaritans came to faith in Jesus that what was meant as a pit stop became a two day visit in the homes of the Samaritans (again, this would NEVER have been done). The Samaritans first believed because of the woman, but now they believe because they have experienced Jesus' ministry for themselves. Jesus is not just the Savior of Judea or Galilee, but the Savior of the whole world. After he left this village, they came to the place where Jesus called "home." And a royal official (likely a higher up in Herod's court), travelled 18 miles from Capernaum to Cana to find Jesus so that he could heal his son. The official's persistent faith was rewarded, he didn't have to see anything, he believed that Jesus could heal his son even from afar. Jesus did heal him from afar, at the very moment when he said "Your son will live."