

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open the bible and light a candle beside it. Set a pitcher of water and bowl nearby.

LEADER: Let us dedicate—

ALL: Our eyes to see where justice must bloom.

LEADER: Our ears to hear God's word and the voices of our times.

ALL: Our minds to wrestle with all God asks of us.

LEADER: Our mouths to dialog with friends and foes.

ALL: Our hearts to welcome neighbors and newcomers.

LEADER: Our shoulders to continue the work of faith.

ALL: Our whole selves to God who is three in one love—
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On the strength of a Samaritan woman's witness, her townspeople come to meet Jesus and believe in him. The Eastern Church gives her the name Photina (light bearer). In her conversation with Jesus, the woman recognizes he has come in spirit and truth to include her people in his community.

Like the fishermen who leave their nets to follow Jesus, she leaves the water jar that symbolizes her work and goes to tell her townspeople she has found the messiah. The strength of the Samaritan woman's word and witness brings her people to hear Jesus for themselves. Her witness can inspire our own.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Her story provides the title for a collection of writings about who Jesus is in women's lives today. The book is *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women* (Orbis 2016). Theologian Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, is the editor.

Her Christology class at Fordham University frequently took Sister Elizabeth to the library. Christology is the study of who Jesus is, our faith seeking theological understanding. In the library Sister Elizabeth looked for articles to add women's voices to the many men's voices already wrestling with who Jesus is for us today.

The articles she has collected explore women's experience of Jesus. Twenty-five women

theologians speak out of cultures rooted in six continents, out of women's struggles for liberation, out of experiences of mothering.

Hispanic theologian Maria Pilar Aquino understands Jesus as liberator of the oppressed. One meets him through participating in *la lucha*, the struggle of the oppressed for dignity and life. "Something is wrong with living in the terrible deprivation so many do," she says. "Faith motivates me to seek justice. Theology is knowledge for liberation and service of the people."

Jeanine Hill Fletcher, a young mother and professor at Fordham, offers breast feeding as an example of self-giving love. "It requires commitment all night and all day to giving of the self to the needs of the other. Humanity suckles at the breasts of Christ as Christ gives himself for the lives of many, and Christians are called to carry on that mother role for a world in need."

● **Where does your Christology come from? What do you say to others about Jesus and our relationship with him?**



GOSPEL

Art: Ansgar Holmberg, CSI

Samaritans take a woman's word.

NARRATOR: On his way through Samaria Jesus came to a town called Sychar near the land Jacob gave his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down at the well. It was about noon. His disciples had gone into town to buy food. A Samaritan woman came to draw some water.

JESUS: Give me a drink.

WOMAN: You are a Jew. How can you ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?

NARRATOR: Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.

JESUS: If only you knew God's gift and who is asking you for a drink, you would ask him and he would give you living water.

WOMAN: Sir, you don't have a bucket and this well is deep. Where do you expect to get living water? You don't pretend to be greater than our ancestors Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, who gave us this well and whose family and flocks all drank from it?

JESUS: Everyone who drinks this water will keep getting thirsty, but whoever drinks the water that I give will never be thirsty again. The water I give will become a spring within that wells up into eternal life.

WOMAN: Sir, give me this water! Then I will never be thirsty again, and I won't have to keep coming here for water.

JESUS: Go, call your husband.

WOMAN: I have no husband.

JESUS: You are right. You have had five husbands, but the man you are living with now is not your husband. What you have said is true.

WOMAN: I see you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship God.

JESUS: Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not understand, while we Jews understand. Salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and is already here, when real worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth. These are the worshipers God wants. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth.

WOMAN: I know the messiah is coming, the one called the Christ, who will announce all things to us.

JESUS: I am the one, who is speaking to you.

NARRATOR: Jesus' disciples returned and were surprised to



What do you see in the art?

find him talking with a woman. The woman left her water jar at the well and went off into the town.

WOMAN: Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did. Couldn't this be the messiah?

NARRATOR: The people set out to meet Jesus. Many Samaritans from that village believed in Jesus on the strength of the woman's word, "He proclaims all the things I ever did." When the Samaritans came to Jesus, they begged him to stay, so he stayed for two days. Many more believed in Jesus after listening to his teachings. They spoke to the woman.

SAMARITAN 1: Now we believe in Jesus not because of your story but because we ourselves have heard him.

SAMARITAN 2: We know this is the Savior of the world.

John 4:5-30, 39-42

Jesus woos a Samaritan woman and her people to faith.

The Samaritan woman has no personal name. The gospel identifies her as a representative of her people. She knows their history and speaks their alienation in her dialog with Jesus.

Jews and Samaritans trace their common ancestry back to the patriarch Jacob, later named Israel, and his wives Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. Twelve tribes descend from this family. With Moses the tribes make a covenant to be God's people and keep the ten commandments. Under David the twelve tribes become one kingdom. After David's son King Solomon, the united kingdom splits in two. Samaria becomes the capital of the northern kingdom; Jerusalem, the capital of the south.

This split deepens after Assyria destroys Samaria, deports many of its people, and resettles the land. These new settlers from Babylon, Cuth, Hamath, Avva, and Sephariam worship their own gods. Because the Samaritans intermarry with them, Samaria becomes the home of heretics, according to the Jews of the south. It is not the woman but Samaria that has had five husbands in its past—the false gods of the new settlers. The story is in 2 Kings 17.

The woman recognizes Jesus is a prophet because he speaks like prophets such as Hosea when he compares people's relationship with God to a marriage. Jesus is calling the woman and her people out of their past relationships with other gods and offering himself as the real husband of Samaria.

● **What difference does it make to recognize Jesus is talking to this woman as a representative Samaritan rather than a sinner?**

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman is more than a conversation. It's a wooing. The signs Jesus works in John's gospel begin with the lavish six jars of wine he provides for a wedding feast that has run out of spirits (2.1-12). Jesus is the bridegroom who pours out the Spirit in a new community.

The setting of Sunday's gospel at a well brings the marriage theme back into the story. The well is a common courting place in ancient times, just as restaurants and other watering

holes are today. Jacob, for whom this well is named, met his wife Rachel at a well. A servant looking for a wife for Jacob's father, Isaac, found Rebecca at a well.

Moses rescued seven sisters at a well and married one of them. At Jacob's well the bridegroom Jesus woos the Samaritan woman and Samaria into union with him in the community of the new Israel.

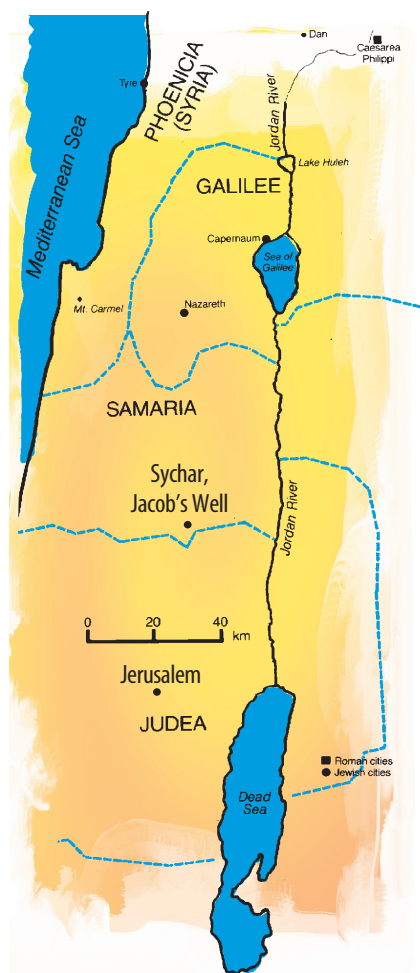
John's gospel contrasts the noontime when Jesus woos the Samaritan woman, a supposed heretic, and the nighttime in the chapter preceeding when Nicodemus, a Jew and strictly observant Pharisee, comes to visit Jesus. Jesus leads both of them on through deliberate double meanings.

Jesus winds up in a monologue with an uncomprehending Nicodemus. The woman, however, questions, objects, and challenges Jesus until in the end she recognizes—aha! he is the messiah. She models bringing one's life story into dialog with Jesus and struggling to break open the word he speaks.

● **What do you appreciate about the woman's faith journey as a wooing?**

“Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well?” the Samaritan woman asks, when Jesus offers her living water. This is a Samaritan question. The well has been an abiding gift to the people of central Israel. But Jesus' gift goes beyond Jacob's. In the water Jesus gives, the Spirit wells up within the person into eternal life. Jesus' gift quenches all thirst.

The wooing moves toward the woman's recognition of Jesus as bridegroom to both Israel and



Samaria. Boundaries begin to give way. The woman acknowledges her people expect a messiah who will tell them the things of God. “*I am he*,” Jesus says, the first of many times in John’s gospel when Jesus uses the divine name God first confided to Moses—I Am.

No wonder the woman leaves her water jar behind and goes to her townspeople. Jesus calls her out of her alienation into his new community of spirit and truth. The messiah has courted and proposed. She challenges the villagers to see in Jesus what she has seen, “Could this be the messiah?” They come and see Jesus and ask him to stay, which in John’s gospel means *to dwell with*. On the strength of the woman’s word of testimony, these Samaritans join the community in which Jesus abides.

In John’s gospel only the Samaritan woman brings a whole group to Jesus. Andrew brings Peter. Philip brings Nathanael. She brings a whole town. She is transparent. Her people see through her to Jesus.

- How does your parish bring people—youth, immigrants, the elderly—to Jesus?
- When have you experienced the Spirit well up within you? Where has trusting the Spirit’s stirrings led you?



Is God in our midst?

On their journey to the promised land, the Israelites’ thirst makes them testy and quarrelsome, nervous about the present and future. They cry out against Moses and God and begin to remember Egypt longingly despite their position there as slaves.

The people forget how recently God brought them safely through the waters of the sea and fed them with manna and quail. They need water and they want it now. They question God’s continuing presence with them. The names Massah and Meribah mean the *quarrel* or *test*, the place where the people asked, “Is God in our midst or not?”

Israelites quarrel.

In their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?” So Moses cried out to God, “What shall I do with these people? A little more and they will stone me!”

God answered Moses, “Go over there in front of the people, along with some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand as you go, the staff with which you struck the river. I will be standing in front of you on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink.”

This Moses did, in the presence of the elders of Israel. The place was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested God, saying, “Is God in our midst or not?”

Exodus 17:3-7

● How do you answer this ancient question? Is God in our midst?

PRAY

Take a brief quiet time to surface alienations and estrangements the gospel brings to mind.

LEADER: Now is the time to build Jesus’ new community.

ALL: Let us worship God in spirit and truth.

EACH: Now is the time to...
(Each can finish the statement above.)

ALL: Let us worship God in spirit and truth.

LEADER: Let all who seek God, come to the waters.

SING: *Come to the Water*, by John Foley, S.J., (Gather #502)

*O let all who seek,
let them come to the water;
and let all who have nothing,
let them come to the Lord:
without money,
without strife.
Why should you spend your
life, except for the Lord?*

Sprinkle each other with water, saying:

EACH: May the love of God continue to be poured out in you.

ALL: May our God bless us always, Source of Life, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.



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