



February 24, 2008

Focus scripture
John 4:5–42

Additional scriptures
Exodus 17:1–7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1–11

Gracious God, you provide for our lives. You supply us with water to satisfy our spirit's thirst. You gift us with words that speak peace and make whole. Even when we question if you are with us, you are there – with life, with welcome. We witness to your grace. Amen.

Go to www.spiritseasons.com and click on Spirit Sightings for international current events, links to this week's theme, discussion questions, and intercessory prayer suggestions.

Water, Word, Witness

Is God with us? Listen to these stories' witness of water and word. Water flows from need to gift. Words shift from misunderstanding to revealing. The confluence of water and word in the Samaritan woman's story witnesses to who Christ is and who we can be. Our need for living water is quenched by the God who is with us.

Focus Scripture: John 4:5–42

Samaria was a region south of Galilee and north of Judah. The hatred between Samaritans and Jews went back to when the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun by Assyria. The Assyrians resettled Samaria with foreigners loyal to them, along with Israelites not taken captive. While Samaritans continued some Jewish practices and beliefs, they were viewed as outsiders to Judaism, little better than Gentiles. This separation grew over the centuries. By the time of Jesus, the enmity between Jews and Samaritans was severe.

The gospel of John includes several long narratives, of which this is the first. Verse 4 is revealing: "But he *had* to go through Samaria." Other routes were available for Jews to bypass Samaria. So for John to say Jesus *had* to go through Samaria suggests other reasons. At the head of that list would be Jesus' ministry among those considered to be "outsiders." Jesus enters Samaria, initiates conversation with a Samaritan woman, and accepts hospitality from the Samaritan community.

Such reversals continue through the story. Jesus asks this woman for water. In **Psalm 95**, God provides water; in Samaria this woman is placed in the role of providing water to Jesus. Even more surprising is the way in which Jesus and this woman engage together in theological discussion. She knows her traditions. She awaits the coming Messiah. In the synagogues of that day, men and women were seated in separate locations. Here at the well, Jesus and this woman sit and speak together about the things of God.

Wordplay occurs around the meaning of *water*. The woman misunderstands Jesus. She confuses Jesus' offer of "living water" with "running water." There are no streams here, only a well. Jesus turns

the discussion from literal meanings to deeper ones. Living water is Jesus' way of speaking about the gift of "eternal life." As in John 3:16, "eternal life" has to do with the gracious possibility of life lived in the presence of God. Such life begins now in the recognition that Jesus is the gift of God (verse 10), who offers such life-giving water to our spirits.

The passage ends on the theme of witness. There is first the woman's witness to her community. Her expression of both doubt and hope ("He cannot be the Messiah, can he?") leaves room for the community to respond. And respond it does. Their confession of Jesus as the "Saviour of the World" offers one of the clearest statements of faith in the entire gospel.

Water and word interplay in our other lections. **Exodus 17:1–7** begins with a need of water that finds answer in the promise of water. **Psalm 95** offers a warning word – a caution against repeating the error of those Israelites who "tested" God in the wilderness. In **Romans 5:1–11**, the word of salvation takes form in God's "pouring" love into our hearts.

These texts also witness to how God is with us. **Exodus 17:1–7** testifies that God "stands" by the rock that provides the life-giving water. **Psalm 95** invites us to enter God's presence with thanks. **Romans 5:1–11** witnesses to the peace and grace and reconciliation that are ours in Christ.

• • • • •

In the gifts of water and word, God reconciles and makes peace. We encounter these gifts in Jesus. What do you and your church learn from the Samaritan woman about telling how Jesus makes a difference in your lives? What "witness" do you offer when life around you – or within you – raises the question: is God with us?

