

*March 8, 2026*

*The Samaritan Woman*

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We are still in John's gospel on this third Sunday in Lent, in fact narratively speaking the story we hear in this morning's gospel immediately follows last week's gospel reading with Nicodemus

Still in John's gospel means still in John's lavish imagery and metaphor-rich text: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty."

The fact that the story of this Samaritan woman at the well comes right on the heels of the story of Nicodemus is no doubt intentional on the part of John and intended for us to juxtapose the details of both stories

Last week's text was the story of a man, an insider, with a name, Nicodemus, and a title, a Pharisee

This week's story is of a woman, an outsider, with no name or title outside of being described by her ethnic background, a woman of Samaria

Nicodemus came at night – the Samaritan woman came in the blaring heat of midday

Nicodemus is told by Jesus that he must be born of water and the Spirit, the woman at the well is offered living water that is the Spirit

Some significant differences – a Pharisee and a Samaritan?! This juxtaposition would have been glaring to John's audience back in the day: a religious insider with power who came to get to know Jesus, and a religious and cultural outsider – an "enemy" you might even say – who Jesus chooses to interact with – it's startling!

And there is some similar imagery of water and Spirit that certainly draws our attention as well

All of this shared in John's wonderful prose that is sometimes hard even for us to follow

Paul Nancarrow, a process theologian and Episcopal priest, notes in his commentary that "in John, Jesus is frequently shown teaching by means of word-play. That is, Jesus uses a word or phrase that can be understood in more than one way." In the story of the woman at the well, think of his use of the term "living water."

"The person Jesus is speaking with takes the word in the easy and obvious sense;" – "The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?'" – "but then Jesus comes back with the other, more unexpected sense" – Jesus said to her, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Clearly we're not just talking about water here, are we?

"The conceptual gap between those two senses creates what in process thought is called a 'proposition'...The proposition invites the learner to make a leap of imagination between meanings – and in that creative act of imagination, the Spirit can join to co-create in the learner a new wisdom, a new consciousness, a direct experience of God's presence and God's gift."<sup>1</sup>

I love this idea – Jesus' words present a proposition that invites the learner to make a leap of imagination

a proposition that is an opportunity for growth in relationship to God and God's creation

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<sup>1</sup> <https://processandfaith.org/lectionary-commentary/the-third-sunday-in-lent-march-8-2026/>

a proposition that, while at face value may sound obscure or silly or fantastical, lures us in towards the revelation of deeper truth

Nicodemus was also propositioned – we might say – when he sought out Jesus asking for proof of his identity as the Messiah and Jesus says to him “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above”

Nicodemus falls for the lure: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

And Jesus follows up: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

Similar set up, similar proposition, similar invitation into deeper relationship with God

But, Nicodemus leaves the conversation unsure: “How can these things be?” he says, and we don’t hear from him to know what leap of meaning-making he took from Jesus’ proposition for a few more chapters

Whereas the Samaritan woman at the well? “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water’...Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’”

While Western Christianity has typically gotten caught up in the five husbands part of Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well, Eastern Orthodox tradition has come to call this woman “Photine” which means “the illuminated one” and tells stories of how after her encounter with Jesus she went around the Mediterranean preaching the good news<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/4099-living-water-third-sunday-in-lent>

Not to diminish Nicodemus and the insiders he represents who get caught up in the institutions and power of the church but who eventually get what Jesus was trying to say and end up becoming followers of Jesus and his way of life, but there is something to this Samaritan woman and the faithfulness generated between her and Jesus in this encounter at Jacob's well

There is something to be said for this boundary-breaking moment for both Jesus and for Photine

There is a marked difference between her story and Nicodemus' story and their proximity to each other seems to indicate that this is indeed something we're supposed to notice!

New Testament scholar Osvaldo Vena notes that "Jesus left us with a crucial lesson to be learned: community can only be built when we are not afraid of overcoming old prejudices and are willing to break the social conventions that dehumanize us. The living water that Jesus promised the woman, symbolized in the water that Moses made come out of the rock in Exodus 17, is God's purifying water, the Holy Spirit (7:37-39), which can purify our hearts of old hatreds and hostilities and form us into a diverse people of God on earth."<sup>3</sup>

It matters that Jesus went to Samaria, it matters that he talked to a woman at a well, it matters that he propositioned her with an image of God's truth that invited her into a deeper knowing and relationship with that truth, and it matters that she responded by running to tell others about what she had experienced

It matters because Jesus' crucial lesson, as Dr. Vena reminds us, is that community can only be built when we are not afraid of overcoming old

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-45-42-3>

prejudices and are willing to break the social conventions that dehumanize us

Both Jesus *and* the Samaritan woman at the well had to overcome prejudices to even engage with each other and what a beautiful truth to realize that God's purifying, living water cares not about boundaries or titles or old squabbles but runs right through each of them, each of us

How stuck are we in our own social conventions that dehumanize each other?

How stuck are we in our social conventions that dehumanize those who hold different political views from us, those of other faiths, other races, abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, immigration status?

List upon list, characteristic upon characteristic, layer upon layer of difference, distrust, and damage to relationships

“Jesus’s willingness to break the social rules of his day means that we, his followers, must live into the truth that people are more than the sum of their political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. Jesus calls us to put aside the stereotypes we carry, the prejudices we nurse, the social and cultural lines we draw. He invites us to look at the Samaritan woman and see a sister and an apostle,” – Photine – “not a harlot, a heretic, a foreigner, or a threat.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the things I observe in our culture right now is our tendency to speak past each other when we encounter difference rather than to each other

Political difference detected – let me spew the rhetoric of my side to prove how I'm right

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2561-the-woman-at-the-well-2>

Religious difference detected – let me belittle your beliefs so that I feel less discomfort with the questions I have of my own

Immigration status unknown – let me dehumanize you so I don't feel my own pain at being forgotten and left behind by my own community

These behaviors don't allow us to speak to each other, at most we speak at each other, and more often than not our words just fly past each other without any form of connection whatsoever

Jesus, in this morning's gospel, intentionally enters "enemy" space to encounter those his friends would consider "other," he does so with vulnerability, with love that doesn't shame or guilt, and he ultimately honors the imagination leap that Photine makes at his proposition to grow into relationship with God by sticking around in this "enemy territory" for a few days to corroborate her story

Jesus propositions Photine – an invitation to let her imagination leap into the current of that living water, the Spirit of God, so that she might co-create with Jesus, with God, a future based in relationship and good news

We have all been propositioned this morning by Jesus to leap into that living water to co-create with God a space where the social conventions that dehumanize each other are disarmed and our "enemies" seen as fellow pilgrims on a journey

For many of us, it *is* a leap of the imagination to think it's possible to engage with those we deem "other" from us and that from this encounter the Spirit might reveal to us a new wisdom, a new consciousness, a direct experience of God's presence and God's gift

"Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

Where did you get such a crazy idea?

Since when have we doubted that through God all things are possible, even conversations with those we disagree with?

If we continue to let this narrative win, that we can't talk across difference that we can't engage in meaningful ways with those who think differently and embody different identities than we do, then the cruelty wins, relationships remain broken, and we've lost sight of the gospel

But if we let ourselves be propositioned by Jesus, let our imaginations leap and step into the running stream of the living water of God's love, perhaps we can realize and proclaim like the Samaritans – who never thought there would be harmony between their community and Jesus' community: "we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Amen.