

Called to Evangelize

John 4:25-42

²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true,

'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Theme Statement

We sense the wonder the Samaritan woman felt in her encounter with Jesus as he crossed various artificial boundaries to converse with her. We share with others the transforming power of God at work in their lives.

Exploring the Word

After returning to Palestine from exile in Babylon, the people of Israel separated themselves from those who were descendants of Israelites and their foreign wives. (See Ezra 10:10-11; Nehemiah 13:23-25.) From the fifth century BCE, therefore, the relationship between the Jews and these descendants, the Samaritans, was hostile.

This session's narrative starts with Jesus at a well in Samaria. It's the middle of a very warm day, and a woman comes to the well to get water for her household. Then Jesus does the culturally unthinkable: he asks her for a drink. She is a Samaritan. Strike one. She is a woman. Strike two. And her marital history is complex. Strikes three, four, and maybe five. Yet Jesus stays engaged in the conversation.

Pastor David Lose, in his blog "In the Meantime," points out that the woman comes at noon, in broad daylight. He says that for John, darkness symbolizes dark deeds and disbelief. And after a few theological questions and answers between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, he gets the chance to introduce himself. Perhaps, according to Lose, she has been responding out of faith, trusting that Jesus was different from those who limited worship to Jerusalem. That's where our study begins.

John 4:25-26 Face to face with the Messiah

Jesus had just answered the Samaritan woman's question about worship in a way that she didn't anticipate (vv. 19-24), and so there is a change of direction. She didn't anticipate his answer about the Messiah either.

This was a time when there were many expectations about the Messiah, and almost as many people claiming to be he. But with Jesus, there was a difference for this woman. He had spoken about her life (vv. 17-18) in a way that a stranger could never do. He acknowledged the challenges she had faced. Try reading his words in verses 17-18 with a tone of care, not judgment. It changes the whole tone of the story.

John 4:27-30 An eager witness

John indicates that the disciples have some questions about Jesus and the woman, but no one asks them. Perhaps they have already realized that Jesus moves in unconventional ways.

Meanwhile, the woman has realized Jesus is someone special, and her enthusiasm moves her to tell the village. The abrupt change in her demeanor got the attention of the townspeople, who came immediately to where Jesus was. This was turning out to be a day of surprises.

John 4:31-38 One sows and another reaps

A conversation about eating becomes John's way of pointing to Jesus' mission: "to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work" (v. 34). Jesus is focused on the harvest—those who are ready and eager to live in God's domain.

Jesus points out to his disciples that seeds of faith may be planted by one person and harvested by another. Note that in verse 25 the woman was the one who brought up the Messiah. She may have heard about him from John the Baptist's disciples. Recall that John the Baptist's call was to "prepare the way for the Lord." The preaching and teaching he did set the stage for Jesus' mission. It was realized here.

John 4:39-42 We have heard for ourselves

In this section, John shows us that the outcome of meeting Jesus is a personal faith in the God who shows grace. Be careful how you read verse 42. Historically, some have allowed a little superiority to come into the villagers' comment. But viewing the woman as a person of faith, we can hear affirmation for her initial testimony and the acknowledgment that they have also seen Jesus as the Messiah. She is affirmed for making the introduction and appreciated for their growth in faith.

The Word Today

James Fowler proposed a theory of six stages that people go through as their faith matures, based on Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development and Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Fowler's six stages of faith development are as follows:

Stage 1, intuitive-projective. In the first stage, often before we start school, fantasy and reality mix together to explain

how the world works. At this time, we get our basic understanding of God from our parents.

Stage 2, mythic-literal. At the second stage, faith stories are predominantly understood in a very literal manner. Logic enters the conversation but isn't always applied to faith. Some people don't progress beyond this level.

Stage 3, synthetic-conventional. By the time they are teenagers, most people adopt a more cohesive and all-encompassing belief system that incorporates morals and values along with stories and rituals. Their experience is focused on that system and they often do not realize that they are limited by it—or even part of it. This is the stage where most people spend their lives.

Stage 4, individuative-reflective. The fourth stage is one where the individual begins to see there are other belief systems, and they ask questions about their own. They may even become disillusioned with their earlier faith expressions. It is ironic, but those in stage 3 view those in stage 4 as "less faithful" than themselves. In reality, they are moving ahead in faith formation.

Stage 5, conjunctive faith. Rarely before midlife do people reach stage 5. In this stage the limits of logic are acknowledged, and paradox is accepted. They embrace mystery and have a new appreciation for sacred story and symbols.

Stage 6, universalizing faith. A small number of people ever reach this level of faith. They fully live their lives in serving others with few worries or doubts about God.

In this session's narrative, the woman who meets Jesus at the well is able to ask him questions because she has reached a level of faith maturity that recognizes other belief systems and acknowledges the limitations of her own.

The people from her town may also show some movement between stages. They initially believe in Jesus because of the testimony of the woman. By the end of the narrative, their belief is based on their own experience.

Why is it important to consider faith as something that develops throughout life?

When we recognize that all of us are at different levels and expressions of faith, we can honor the beliefs of others while embracing where we ourselves are. We find ourselves encouraging others to grow in faith and even seek out those who can help us mature.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Name a time when seeing something from a different perspective has changed your understanding of it.
2. Where do you put yourself on the continuum below:

Faith should never be questioned.	Faith questions can always be answered.	God is found more in the question than in the answer.
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Exploring the Word

1. Viewing the woman as a sinner, on the one hand, and as a person of faith, on the other, compare and contrast the woman's conversation about the Messiah.
2. What questions might the people in town want to ask the woman when she tells them she may have met the Messiah?

3. How might Jesus' words that "one sows and another reaps" (v. 37) encourage the disciples?
4. Imagine the conversation between the people of the village and the woman the next day. What do you think they might say to each other?

The Word Today

1. Which stage of Fowler's faith development model feels most comfortable for you at this point in your life?
2. Who do you know that encourages you to grow in faith?

Closing Prayer

Merciful God, . . . let the brightness of your light shine on your church, so that all your people, instructed in the holy gospel, may walk in the light of your truth and attain eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. . . . Amen. (ELW, p. 54)

Further Study

Matthew 8:5-13; the power of faith

Daily Readings

M. Revelation 21:1-7	F. John 1:43-51
T. John 8:21-30	S. John 4:43-54
W. Romans 8:12-17	S. John 4:25-42
T. John 1:37-42	

Memorization

John 4:39

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."