John 4:1-42

We continue our journey through the Gospel of John, the last Gospel written, about ten decades or five generation after the crucifixion event. Johns' Gospel is the product of first century Jewish mysticism. It was not a gospel where Jesus became not a visitor from another realm, but a person in whom a new God consciousness had emerged. Seen from this new perspective, the claim of oneness with the Father was not incarnational language like that of the synoptic gospels, but mystical language.

John's Gospel, referred to as the Fourth Gospel, was written in different layers by different authors over a period of about thirty years. It does not contain, in any sense, the literal "words of God." In all probability, none of the sayings attributed to Jesus in this Gospel was ever spoken by the Jesus of history.

None of the miracles, called "signs" in this book, such as the turning of water into wine at Cana and attributed to Jesus, ever actually happened. Most of the characters that populate the pages of this gospel are literary or fictionalized creations of the author, and were never real people who ever lived.

One of the earlier sources incorporated into the Gospel of John is known as the "Book of Signs." Much of its material is found in chapters 2 to 11 of the Fourth Gospel. In the "Signs book," a sign is depicted as a mighty

act, done publicly, that points to something even bigger and more important.

The Fourth Gospel is a book that is a peculiar and specific creation of a mind profoundly influenced by the Jewish experience. A popular first century form of Jewish mysticism has shaped, in a significant way, the message of the book. Literalism can never be applied to this book.

The fourth Gospel draws on images out of Jewish scriptures with which only a Jewish person would be familiar. Mysticism is a part of every religious system, existing on the fringe of acceptability. Theologians called the Fourth Gospel a “spiritual gospel,” or a “mystical gospel.” Jewish mysticism grew out of Jewish “Wisdom” literature. Mysticism has a way of expanding words beyond their normal limits.

Religious literalism requires infallible leaders and inerrant scriptures. Literalism is thus always the enemy of faith which is ultimately the opposite of certainty. John’s gospel more than any other part of Biblical text makes a mockery of literalism, always holding it up to ridicule. Mystical eyes can never be literal eyes, specifically Jewish mystical eyes.

To assume things recorded in the Bible are actual events is to confuse storytelling and parable with history. John fills his work with literary or fictional, not historical, characters and weaves around them his

interpretation of Jesus.

To tell today's story, John has created yet another symbolic figure and thus another mythological character, one whom we call the "Samaritan woman at the well." Traditional male voices tend to see this woman in sexual terms, as one who flaunts her sexual immorality. This understanding violates the message of the Fourth Gospel and completely distorts John's meaning.

In the Hebrew Scriptures and stories, a well is the place where one goes in search of a wife and the reference to this being Jacob's well makes that abundantly clear. So this narrative is not the recollection of an actual event, but a story designed to provide a new insight into the Jesus experience.

In the book of Genesis, Abraham, the family patriarch, sends his senior servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant encounters a young virgin at the well. The servant asks her for a drink and she complies, as well as watering his camels. All goes well and he ends up bringing Rebekah back to Abraham to be the wife of Isaac.

Later in Genesis, Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, goes in search of a wife for himself. He travels east and stops at a well where some shepherds come to water their sheep. Among them he sees beautiful Rachel with her flock. He falls in love with her and eventually she

becomes his wife. In Exodus we find Moses, forced to flee the Pharaoh into the wilderness. There he finds a well and sits down by it. Seven daughters of a Midian priest come to the well to draw water. There Moses finds his wife Zipporah.

In scriptures, when a man and woman meet by a well, the encounter is viewed as a "mating game." Jesus, travelling alone from Judea to Galilee, comes to the town of Sychar, in the region of Samaria and stops to rest by a well known as "Jacob's well." It is high noon. The Samaritan woman will not come to Jesus by night, as Nicodemus did; she will come in the clear light of midday sun. She comes to draw the water that will sustain the life of her family. Jesus asks her for a drink. Jesus is cast by the Fourth Gospel in the role of the bridegroom, inviting the Samaritans to become a faithful constituent part of the "new Israel," another name for the developing Christian covenant.

The Samaritan woman, recognizing that what is really happening is a courtship, cuts to the chase and places into the conversation the history of the fracture between Jews and Samaritans. "How is it," she says, "that you, a Jew ask for a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" This fracture had its origins first in the secession from Judah of the ten tribes that constituted the Northern Kingdom of Israel which occurred at the time of the death of Solomon around the year 920 BCE.

That fracture meant that the northern part of the Israelite nation

separated itself from the house of David, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. In time, the citizens of the Northern Kingdom built themselves a capital city which they named Samaria and which they hoped would come to rival Jerusalem. Then they transformed the sacred shrines in this Northern Kingdom into their own indigenous holy places in order to compete with the Jerusalem Temple. As they tried to define themselves against Jerusalem, more and more these people of the north saw themselves as related primarily not to the royal house of David, but to the original patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and especially Jacob, who had changed his name to Israel. The rivalry between these two parts of what was once a single nation was intense.

In the war that followed this secession, the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom were victorious and so their separation was secured. The hostilities between the two nations, did not abate. Frequently they found themselves allied with opposing powers, such as Assyria and Babylonia. The split also meant that both segments of the “chosen people” began to define themselves primarily against the other. Hatred, based on this rivalry was deep. Prejudices developed that fed the survival needs of each.

As we learned from Jeremiah back in November, this already tense relationship took a dramatic turn around the year 721 BCE, when Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was destroyed in warfare by the Assyrian armies, while Judah, Assyria’s ally, looked on from a distance. Judah then

accepted its status as a vassal state to Assyria in order to retain some semblance of independence.

To prevent future rebellions, the Assyrians transported many of the people of Israel into exile in Assyria and repopulated that part of these people's former homeland with peoples from other conquered provinces. In time, intermarriage between the exiled people with their conquerors occurred and their DNA simply blended into that of the Middle East. Those exiled to Assyria in time became known in Jewish history and in folklore as the "ten lost tribes of Israel." Those Israelites who were allowed to remain in the land that once was the Northern Kingdom intermarried with the imported foreigners. From the point of view of the people of Judah, who now began to be called Jews, the people of the north became a "mongrel race" and their religious practices began to be syncretized with foreign ideas in which the purity of Israel's ancient faith was believed to have been badly compromised.

Now both race and religion became barriers to unity and were developed as sources of enormous prejudice. There was, however, enough of the residual faith left in the people of the north that they retained their claim to be part of the original covenant rooted in the pre-Jerusalem patriarchs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They centred their faith in a holy mountain in the north, not eager to claim kinship with that part of the covenant people who gathered around the house of David in the south and whose life was centred in the Temple of Jerusalem.

The tension between the two groups grew more intense in the early years of the sixth century BCE when the kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians and its people exiled to the land of Babylon. This exile was different in one essential way from the mixing of races that typically followed war. These exiled Jews were determined to return to their home someday and that desire forced them to separate themselves radically from non-Jews in overtly distinguishing ways.

So they adopted such practices as strict Sabbath day observances, kosher dietary laws and mandated circumcision. In time, when these exiles were allowed to return to their homeland, they saw themselves as quite distinct from and superior to those who had remained in their conquered land, whose bloodlines were now suspect and whose religious practices were assumed to be corrupt. The term “Samaritan” was then applied to this group of people as well, and the hostility between the returning Jews and the “half-breeds” who populated their former homeland was palpable.

All of these feelings are captured in this Johannine episode when the Samaritan woman responds to Jesus’ request for a drink of water at the well of Jacob by shifting the conversation to the gaping divide between Jews and Samaritans. From this moment on, the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a deep theological conversation about human boundaries and what role Jesus would play in the world of human tensions.

To the woman's hostile question as to why he, a Jew, would ask her, a Samaritan, for water, Jesus responds with a new invitation. He offers her "living water," a synonym in Hebrew scriptures for the spirit that binds human life together. The woman, not yet understanding the dialogue, notes that he has nothing in which to draw water from the well. His offer seems to her to be an empty one. Then she asks him the key question: "Are you greater than *our* ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well?" Note the use of the pronoun "our." She is identifying herself with the ancient covenant made with the patriarchs. The Samaritans were part of that covenant since they were the descendants, however corrupted, of Jacob.

Jesus responds once more by lifting the conversation beyond this ancient division. Jacob's well provides water that sustains life, but only momentarily. Those who quench their thirst with the waters from Jacob's well will thirst again. Jesus is offering a kind of water that causes people to become so whole they will never again know thirst.

The woman, intrigued by this image, but still bound by her limiting literalism, says, in effect: That is a wonderful vision. Give me this water and I will never have to come here to draw from this well again. I will transcend the gift of Jacob!

Jesus, hearing this, asks her to call her husband. "I have no husband," she responds. Jesus, acting as if he has foreknowledge of her entire life,

responds that she not only has no husband now, but she has had five husbands and the man with whom she now lives is not her husband. At this point, people forget that this woman is a mythological symbol of Samaria and so they read this statement moralistically, as if this were a commentary on her loose sexual proclivities.

To read this story that way is to miss its meaning completely. This is a symbolic conversation about how the unfaithful region of Samaria can be incorporated into the new understanding of Christianity that Jesus is believed to present and about how ancient religious divisions in the human family can be overcome in the new human consciousness that Jesus comes to bring.

She then asks the one she identifies as “a prophet” to settle the dispute as to whether true worship is to be identified with Mount Gerizim in Samaria or with the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus asserts that God is beyond that sort of human limit. God is spirit, unbounded and all-permeating, and those who worship this God must do so in spirit and in truth. Salvation comes from the Jews, he asserts; but he immediately transcends the Jewish limits to embrace *all* people, including those who were the deepest objects of Jewish scorn, the Samaritans.

This dialogue makes little sense so long as we assume that the Samaritan woman is a real person. She is not. She is a symbol of Samaria itself. So Jesus is proclaiming that even those considered

worthy of rejection by the Jews are to be included in the realm of God to which Jesus is the opening.

What, then, is this story saying about this woman's five husbands? The reference is to a passage in *II Kings* in which we are told that the king of Assyria brought people from *five countries* and placed them in the cities of Samaria. Then the king commanded that a priest, then exiled in Assyria, be returned to Samaria to teach the new residents of the land the laws of the God of that land. The people of Samaria were not faithful, but rather bonded with the false gods served by the people of the *five resettled nations*. These were the *five husbands* of the unfaithful Samaritans, symbolized by this Samaritan woman.

Jesus concludes this conversation by using for the first time in John's gospel the name of God, "I AM," revealed to Moses at the burning bush. This name rooted the God experience in the pre-Jerusalem, pre-house-of-David part of the chosen people's history. It had to include Samaritans since the name "I AM" itself located God in the being of humanity, not in the narrow cultic dimensions of human religion. Samaria was to be part of the new Israel. No one was to be excluded. There was a new and different understanding of what it means to be human, and that was what Jesus came to reveal. This story is not about sexual immorality, it is about faithfulness to the God who draws us beyond human barriers, human divides and human prejudices.

The Samaritan woman, ecstatic over what she has heard, leaves her water pot to become an evangelist, just as John and James had earlier left their fishing nets to follow Jesus. The mission to the Samaritans is now in the hands of a woman, meaning that another barrier to oneness in the human family is being overcome. She goes to their village, relates her experience and raises with them the possibility that Jesus might be "the Messiah." She is portrayed as having been quite successful; the Samaritans left their towns and came to Jesus. They asked Jesus to stay with them. He did for two days, and we are told that many believed "because of his word."

The Samaritan woman becomes a herald of the new revelation. Jesus is a barrier-breaker. Before him falls the human division, first between Jews and Samaritans, and then between women and men. A vision of "the realm of God" slowly begins to come into view. We continue to be challenged to live into this vision of the "realm of God," this vision of inclusivity, this vision of oneness where none are excluded no matter their religion, their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their ethnicity. The challenge is great indeed.

Amen.