

John's Gospel is unique. It is the only gospel to be written not as a history of the life of Jesus, but as a book about the truth of who Jesus was—a book of theology. Ever since it was written—around 120 AD-- it has been used as the written curriculum used to train new followers of Jesus.

The gospel of John is filled with many great stories—but it is important to remember when reading this book that it is meant to be a book of signs and symbols—and not to be read literally. If it is read literally, it is enjoyable, you will get a lot out of it—but you will miss John's dedication to showing us not just what this Jesus of Nazareth did, but who he was.

We deal with such signs and symbols everyday.

If we are watching a movie and the young man and woman start to walk up a steep flight of rickety stairs with a flashlight while in the background spooky music is playing- what's going to happen?

Say that we read about or see someone bring in a cake with candles on it we know that that cake represents someone's...birthday.

Even before *The Bachelor* became popular-- what does it mean when a man approaches a woman with a red rose and a small black box?

These are symbols we all see and instantly understand.

The story today begins with a huge – red flag waving symbol to Jewish people everywhere: Jesus meets a woman at a well.

If you were a Jew of Jesus' day, you would smile.

Here's why: it would instantly bring to mind at least three stories from the Old Testament. Since we're not as familiar with the Old Testament stories as those Jews were—we miss the reference.

So settle in: I'll tell you a story.

The first story is from the book of Genesis: Abraham has a son named Isaac. Abraham wants him to find a wife—but not from the small group of people in their community—so he sends Isaac to his old hometown. There Isaac finds the community well and waits. Women of that time were the

ones to gather water at the wells for their families. He asks each young woman who comes to give him a drink. If one does, he might offer to water her livestock. This is a time honored tradition of courtship. If the woman gives the water, the answer is yes.

We all know the ending—Rebekah says yes through this ritual, and eventually marries Isaac.

Just five chapters later, Jacob—son of Rebekah and Isaac-- goes in search of a wife for himself. Isaac sends him to look among Isaacs own kin, in his old hometown, and Jacob goes. He stops at a well, and finally sees a young woman watering her flocks and he asks her for a drink. The rest.. as they say...

The third example concerns Moses. Now we all remember Moses: the man who challenges Pharoah, parts the Red Sea? Well, before that happened, he was forced to flee Egypt, running for his life, when we found a well and sat down by it. I think we all know what's coming...Seven daughters of a priest in Midian come to water their sheep-- when they are suddenly attacked. Moses comes to their aid, drives off the bad men, and proceeds to water the daughter's flock. He asks one for a drink: Zipporah, who becomes his wife.

So are we seeing the symbolism of the wells and water? The story tries to even give a hint to us—it is Jacob's well.

So is Jesus looking for a wife?

No—but in John's time Christ is known as the Bridegroom, and a bridegroom seeks a Bride. Who is the bride of Christ in our theology? The Church. The followers of Christ.

The symbolic Samaritan woman immediately sees the well, coupled with the cup of water ritual as the initiation of courtship, and she cuts right to the chase: Samaritans and Jews do not even like each other. There is deep hatred on both sides. The Jews feel like they are the loyal remnant from their years of exile. The Samaritans , however, stayed in their homeland, but

eventually intermarried—over and over-- with the foreigners sent to repopulate the country by their conquerors. She knows this.

But Jesus asks one of these hated people for a drink, symbolically inviting them to become joined with him as a faithful part of his new movement. From this moment on, Jesus' conversation with the woman, and then the town becomes a deep theological conversation about human boundaries. He is courting them, if you'd like, into a new relationship.

Those who were not accepted are now offered living water as a sign of this union where of everyone becomes whole again.

Humanity has always been riddled with insecurity--which becomes a desire to tear down anyone who isn't exactly like us.

But Jesus is offering this woman—and her people--*of a hated clan*-- the opportunity to drink of this living water that binds all of humanity together.

That's the message of this story. Jesus offers living water to women—equally to men. Jesus offers living water to the people considered different, unclean—people who have broken the rules of Hebraic culture. He even offers it to the 12- who seem incapable of responding to Jesus in any way other than the literally. Even they—the followers of Jesus--- don't always understand that what Jesus offers—this living water-- is for EVERYONE.

Christ wants us to drink deeply of the water so that we will never again know the thirst that comes with being outcast. Christ is holding it out to us so we will never feel the insult of being less than others in society—like the women. Jesus pours out this water so that humanity can finally put aside our differences, our prejudices, our self-righteousness—and finally become the righteous, just people of God.

The story of the rose and the ring and the well of life take on new meaning as Jesus comes to ask us all to be nothing less than the bride of Christ.

Amen.

The Rose and the Ring at the Well of Life
Lent 3

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