

John 4:5-26
Third Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Imagine daily life built around and dependent on a man-made structure credited to be nearly 1900 years old. That was Jacob’s well, in the field which he gave to son Joseph more than 400 years *before* the Exodus! In our day, that would be like us Elgin-ites depending on something left here by Trajan or Marcus Aurelius or Polycarp or Justin Martyr. Imagine going back to that same man-made structure every day, living all of daily life dependent on it, but it never really satisfying any of life’s great questions for more than that day. That’s sort of the image the Holy Spirit paints in giving us this text.

In fact, you have perhaps heard the phrase, “going back to the well”... going back repeatedly to a particular source that you believe is lucrative and beneficial and depending on it over and over and over again. And yet, the whole reason you have to go back to it is because it cannot provide *once* a benefit that lasts forever! Isn’t that what the woman admitted?: “Give me *your* water that I need

not come back to this well.” That’s the reality, not only for the woman, but for us. We’re constantly going back to those man-made things – even man-made religious ideas – that we think will sustain us forever, but in our heart of hearts we know they won’t... If only someone could give us something better, so that we would not need to keep relying on those faulty hopes we now depend upon.

We keep going back to the same broken promises of the world, the same sinful habits, over and over again, though they do the same thing every time. What’s the colloquial definition of insanity? – doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. Whether that’s insanity or just plain stupidity, it certainly is the trap we find ourselves in when we go back to the same well of lifeless water that can never quench our thirst for life that will endure for eternity. That’s all our society and world knows, that insanity.

In that way, the woman at the well very well represents our society and all of us in it, and does so in three distinct ways:

First, she’s a woman of Samaria and, thus, separated from the line of Abraham because her line had married itself to the world. That’s the definition of those Samaritans, isn’t it? – yes, of the line of Abraham, but somewhere down the line, generations since, had intertwined themselves with the world and tried to have one foot in each camp – children of Abraham, but willing to compromise some of that to be wed to the world.

We're constantly lured by the same temptation. In John 17, Jesus very clearly prays for his followers as those who are "in the world, but not of the world." But we are constantly wanting to be "of the world" and marry ourselves to its allurements. "So many promises the world makes!" we think. Who cares if they don't all pan out... surely, *one* of them will, won't it? And, with that willingness to belittle the baptismal truth we are to be known as *children of God*, we are tempted to marry the ways of the world, be children of the world, and have one foot in each camp.

But you cannot be 'Christian on Sunday' and 'of the world' the rest of the week. You cannot be follower of the true Christ on Sunday and of a false Christ (or *ashamed* of Christ) during the week. But the allurements of the world are great, so that we must honestly assess that much of our daily life is tempted to twist God's holy will, to redefine it into a false doctrine (isn't this what Luther says is the most frequent breaking of the Second Commandment? – wearing Christ's name, but "You shall not *misuse* the Name of the Lord"... we use our daily life to promote a false doctrine). What's so different about the Samaritans and, shall we say, Americanized Lutherans? We have much to repent of... and, as we shall see, much to take comfort from in Jesus' words to the woman at the well. But, not until we consider that –

Second... the second way the woman closely represents us is that she is a sinful outcast... at the well in the heat of the day (noon)

because she is socially unacceptable – a known sinner. Do we confess that of ourselves but somehow think more highly of ourselves? No, before God, we deserve no better title and reputation than sinful outcast – not welcome to associate with God in the cool of the day (as Adam and Eve did in their perfection)... just as the woman was not able to associate with others at the well in the cool of the day.

And she's a known sinner because of the public shame she has brought to the marriage bed, her callous abuse of the marriage estate.

Jesus doesn't let that be swept under the rug. Instead he puts in the spotlight:

“Call your husband.”

“I don't have a husband.”

“You're right. You've had five! And the man you are currently sleeping with isn't even a husband!”

Certainly, the five husbands hadn't all died... or she wouldn't be an outcast, but a widow to be most pitied (though maybe there'd be reason to suspect foul play!). Neither is it likely she was, in *all* five marriages, the *victim* of divorce; or she wouldn't now be treated as the outcast. And, if she *were* without sin, there would be no current impropriety for Jesus to highlight. No, it should not be dismissed by the reader that this woman has made a mess of the marriage estate.

And yet, it does pass us by all too easily, because we as a society are guilty of the same. We've made a mess of the marriage estate. To be sure, every Christian can and should be sympathetic for every *victim* of divorce – what pain they've had to endure, not ultimately of their own doing; what tragedy they've had to endure. But such does not mean we learn to *normalize* divorce. Neither do we 'reduce divorce' by simply engaging in the marriage bed without the actual marriage. Men and women living together apart from marriage? – there better be a second bedroom involved... and the arrangement better be about sharing the rent and not the bed. And where that's not the case, the matter better be repented of and immediately remedied by marriage or separation.

What a poor job our society has done in defending the marriage estate. Sitcoms mock it; social agendas try to redefine it; couples don't trust it, or they leave it; government treats it as a financial contract; educational institutions treat it as an impediment to the true success of a career; and – *most* harmfully – Christians follow society. We pretend this mess is all some 'equal alternative' within God's design of creation, and therefore we fail to confess marriage as the grand motif of all Scripture. Have you ever noticed that? The entirety of Scripture is about Christ's marriage to His Church, so that our earthly marriages are an echo of Christ's marriage to His Church. The marriage estate is the very foundation and heart of God's perfect plans for His creation... as Luther

confesses in the Large Catechism that children should be taught that “God has most richly blessed this estate above all others... it has the highest importance to God... it comes first and surpasses them all.” How many in our society are willing to say that to the youngest generations? There’s a big difference between us saying, “You should trust and love God’s plans for marriage and desire them for yourself”... there’s a big difference between faithfully confessing *that* and merely saying, “Don’t be immoral. Don’t have sex before marriage. Don’t look at pornography. Don’t cheat on your spouse. Don’t get divorced.” Really? That’s the *best* we can say of God’s most blessed marriage estate, the highest estate of His creation? How much our generation has to repent of!... again, well-illustrated in the woman at the well. And yet, Christ comes to her. We might make a mess of the marriage estate, but Christ does not. His marriage to His Church is for all sinners everywhere.

The *third* way the Holy Spirit describes the woman at the well as a representative of us sinners is that she and her people lived by their own made-up worship, a man-made worship *they* were pleased with, so they believed *God* should be pleased with: “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain.” So what? What does that have to do with worship as defined by the Word of God?

But, is that any different than our generation? “Our fathers taught salvation by works.” So what? What does that have to do with worship as defined by the Word of God? “Our fathers taught

decision theology... Our fathers taught limited atonement. Our fathers worshiped with praise music and wrote new worship every week." Okay, great. What does that have to do with worship as defined by the Word of God?

The knee-jerk self-defense that arises every time you point that out comes *because*, deep down, our generation is very uncertain about its worship. But it doesn't know what else to do, so it keeps going back to the same well of lifelessness. Isn't that what the woman at the well's answer tells us about her own uncertainty. Notice how she immediately qualifies her statement: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." In other words, "Prophet, give me some certainty. Where *should* true worship happen?" Our generation might say, "What *should* true worship look and sound like? What *should* its heart and content be?"

Jesus responds:

"Believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know (uncertainty!); we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth."

Notice what Jesus says: "Neither location is right! The location isn't even the issue. It is *what* you worship that is the issue.

You worship what you do *not* know (you're uncertain about it!); we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews." (Notice, Jesus doesn't say "true worship is from the Jews", for here he even hints that the Jews will have strayed from perceiving the true heart and content of worship – namely, Him. He is the heart of true worship; he is the content of worship; he is *what* is to be worshiped. And, "how"? – "in spirit and truth."

We know what "in truth" means – right doctrine. What does "in spirit" mean? "In spirit" does not mean "spiritual feelings." It means "in the spirit that is a product of the baptismal work of the Holy Spirit, whom Christ pours out generously on us in Baptism. Yes, our spirit agrees with the Holy Spirit, who is the Lord and giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who gives life to the Church, so that we confess that Church to be the work of the Holy Spirit:

"I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy Christian Church,
The communion of saints..."

And that Holy Spirit leads us into the truth, just as Jesus promised he would: "I will send you another, the Comforter. He will lead you into all truth, for He will take what is mine (I'm the object of your worship) and declare it to you (that you may truly worship)."

Notice that – "He will take what is mine and declare it to you." *Jesus' Word. Jesus' gifts. Jesus' promises...* There's true

worship... to receive what Jesus pours forth from Himself... just as Jesus himself promises that He would grant a living water, that we might never be thirsty ever again. Those who thirst for righteousness are satisfied by Christ Jesus and the spring of water that flows forth from Him into a flood of eternal life for us.

In fact, there's an intended little twist in our Gospel Reading that can be seen in the Greek, but not in the English. In the Greek, the word that is used for Jacob's well (πηγη) is the same word used to speak of the *spring* of living water. Jacob's promises may be ancient, but not much of a 'spring.' *You* must fetch the water; and it gives no lasting benefit or comfort. It's a life-*less* water. But Jesus promises a life-*giving* water, and it springs from Him to you... you need not work for it; you need not earn it. You simply are showered with it and bathe in it and are refreshed by it.

Now, go back to the Old Testament Reading and the wilderness of Sin. What a parched, arid-sounding land... void of any promise of life and leaving the people thirsty and near death (what a great picture of what sin does to us as we go back to that same well of sin over and over again!). And then, God tells Moses to strike the rock.

How do you envision what happened next? Did the Rock trickle forth this small little trickle of water... barely enough to notice, perhaps a little stream that I could almost cup my hand under? Couldn't have been that way. The text was enough to quench

the thirst of more than a million people (not to mention their livestock)! This was a *springing forth*, a *gushing forth* of life.

Now, how do you envision it when the soldier plunged the sword into Christ's side and blood and water poured forth? And how do you envision it when Christ promises not just that his blood was *once* shed for you, but that it *is* (present tense) in the Sacrament *poured out* for you for the forgiveness of your sins... some little 'trickle of life', just barely enough to save a person... or a river of life, enough to save the whole world?

That is the great *promise* you worship (meaning, you receive) in spirit and in truth. What Christ sustains His Church with – so that we need not keep drawing from the lifeless well of this world and its sin – what Christ sustains His Church with is a living spring of water, springing forth not just from a rock (OT reading), but from his very Self... doesn't St Paul even tell the Corinthians that the wandering children of Israel "all drank from the same spiritual drink, for they all drank from the spiritual Rock... and that Rock was Christ"? Yes, *their* life sprang forth from Him. *Your* life springs forth from Him. Springing forth from his cross, when water and blood poured forth... and from that cross, through the Sacraments, life-giving waters of Christ Jesus in which we receive His Holy Spirit, that we may worship in the Spirit and in truth... and may do so in the joy and certainty and strength of new life... life restored, life refreshed, life with thirst forever quenched.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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March 8, 2026