

Unlikely messenger: John 4:5-42

This is not a metaphorical desert. Left alone here at high noon, Jesus could die without water.

by [Patricia Farris](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

Once again, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness for a critical encounter. This time he meets not Satan, but a most unlikely angel. In the heat of the day, a messenger of God joins him for a life-giving exchange.

Tired from his journey, Jesus sits down at Jacob's well, then realizes that he has no cup or bucket with which to draw water. The disciples have gone off to buy food and he is alone. But someone else is out in this desert heat, and she's carrying a bucket. She may be the last person on earth Jesus wants to encounter, because not only is she a woman, she is a divorced woman. A woman with a shady past. A Samaritan. By custom, Rabbi Jesus ought not even speak with her in public, let alone drink from her Samaritan bucket.

It is about noon, the sixth hour. There are no shadows, there is no protective cover, no nighttime leisure for theological exchange and reflection. There is only this woman, and she is insolent, defensive, strong and determined. What transpires between these two is nothing short of miraculous. These strangers, these enemies—whose worlds would ordinarily never connect—discover at the well that they need each other.

It's hard to imagine that this is a chance encounter. Apparently, Jesus had told the disciples to journey directly into enemy territory, when most Jews would have taken an extra nine hours or so to go around Samaria, which was unclean, enemy territory. Perhaps Jesus was intentionally seeking to break down barriers between people by making himself a bridge. He put himself in a place where he would have to encounter the people his people hated. And who hated them.

For the sake of healing, Jesus follows the lead of the Holy Spirit and makes himself vulnerable. He is tired and alone in the heat of the noonday sun with no water. It is

not a metaphorical desert. Left alone here at high noon, he could die without water. But someone has joined him at the well—the Other, the Stranger, the Enemy. And she holds the cup that can quench his thirst.

We don't know why the disciples left Jesus alone in the desert. But the woman, whose name is never revealed, is out in the heat of noonday because she has been ostracized and shunned, and is on her own to provide for her most basic needs. No father, husband, brother or son is around to look after her. And there is no group of women to share her story, wipe her tears or help her to laugh.

Jesus needs to drink fresh water to live. The woman also needs a drink: she needs the fresh, living water of grace and truth only Jesus can provide to drink deep of healing and wholeness and a new life. And in their various needs, these two affirm their mutual humanity. They share in the holy Source of Life that transcends all boundary, custom, hatred, fear and scarcity.

In the desert at noon, with all distraction stripped away, all shadows erased, the light shines bright enough for these two strangers to discover that they need each other. As they are transfigured in the light of the noonday sun, each enemy sees the face of a friend. Distance dissolves into relationship. Enmity melts into mutuality. They glimpse a spiritual wholeness, a new healing reality.

Jesus models a barrier-breaking relationship of mutuality and compassion. The woman is bold enough to both remind Jesus of what separates them—he a Jew and she a Samaritan—and of what connects them—their ancestor Jacob. She is audacious and spars verbally with this strange man. In their truth-telling, she experiences him as prophet and in turn she is acclaimed for speaking the word.

To this day, the Samaritan woman is honored in many cultures. In southern Mexico, La Samaritana is remembered on the fourth Friday in Lent, when water flavored with chilacoyota, tamarindo, jamaice and horchata is given to commemorate her gift of water to Jesus. The Orthodox know her as St. Photini, or Svetlana in Russian. Her name means "equal to the apostles," and she is honored as apostle and martyr on the Feast of the Samaritan Woman.

The gospel witnesses to the gift of God for all God's children. In the vulnerability of an interdependent community, in the insistence upon relationship, in the breaking down of barriers. Jesus shows us a new way to learn about one another, learn the truth of one another, and learn that we need one another. True worship takes place

not at a sacred mountain or even a shared ancestral well, but in a relationship with the person of Christ, who is the wellspring and mountaintop of hope and peace.

On another day, also about noon, Jesus will face death and again confess his thirst. On that day, only vinegar will be offered—in mockery. The gift of his living water will not be apparent to the one holding that sour sponge. But today, when Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet, they conspire to bring life out of death. The water they offer each other, water that quenches the thirst of body and soul, holds the gift of life for all.