

The Woman at the Well
The Rev. Amy Spagna
March 8, 2026 – Lent 3A
John 4:5-42

When we studied the Gospel of John back in seminary, our professor, Harry Attridge, began his lecture about the story of the Samaritan woman at the well by saying, "Jesus is trying to pick her up." Coming from a scholar of his caliber, and given how ethereal and otherworldly John's characterization of Jesus often is, it was a bit surprising to hear it framed in these very human terms. That said, any scene where Jesus is having a long conversation with someone whom he's just met should make us ask questions about what he's doing there. That very question was what prompted Professor Attridge's comment. We don't *expect* Jesus to demand a drink of water, much less from a woman who's not related to him. We don't *expect* that she will respond as she does, or that she would have a whole theological conversation with him. And we definitely don't expect her to understand exactly what Jesus tells her, and then act on it.

The Bible, on the whole, doesn't center women in its narrative all that much. When it does, it's a glowing neon stop sign. It tells us to pay attention, so we don't miss the Very Important Thing that's being said or is happening. This episode is no exception. While John doesn't say so outright, the Samaritan woman does have a name. It's Photini. It comes down to us through stories that developed about her both in the early Church and later in the Orthodox tradition. There, she is celebrated as an equal to the apostles themselves, thanks to what she does to spread the gospel among her own people.¹ As John tells her story, it's about a seemingly random encounter with

¹ "Photini: the Samaritan Woman, c. 67." <https://prayer.forwardmovement.org/calendar/photini> [accessed March 4, 2026]

Jesus. It's also about our expectations in moments like this, and what happens when they are not met in some way. "Expectation" is just one of the many threads to pull out of this chapter. To get to it want to start by focusing on the three themes of place, context, and what happens when we meet someone who throws us off our game.

First of all, we have the theme of *place*. John is careful to set up the location of the conversation between Jesus and Photini at a well outside Sychar, also known as Shechem. It was a very important location in the Old Testament: it's the location where Abraham made his covenant with God, and also where Joshua, Moses' successor, would lead the people in renewing that covenant when they arrived back in the land after leaving Egypt. Wells are also important meeting places. They provided more than just water to the people who used them: "Abraham's servant meets his master's future daughter-in-law [Rebekah] at a well (Genesis 24:10–61); Abraham's grandson, the eponymous Jacob, meets his wife Rachel at a well, at noon (Genesis 29:1–20). Even Moses meets his wife at a well (Exodus 2:15–22).

"In all these stories, a man travels to a foreign land, meets a woman at a well, and they discuss water. Once water has been drawn, the woman leaves the well to tell her community about the man. Her community offers hospitality to the man, and the encounter concludes with their marriage. A well in a story was the equivalent to a modern romantic comedy's meet-cute, where the two main leads encounter one another for the first time. Such scenes set up expectations for what is to come."²

Those expectations include what Professor Attridge called "the pick-up attempt." That, in turn brings us to the issue of the broader geographical context of where this

² Laura Holmes, "Commentary on John 4:5-42." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-45-42-7> [accessed March 3, 2026].

encounter actually takes place. This particular well is in territory belonging to the Samaritans – the very same Samaritans who are mentioned in Luke's famous parable. They are cousins of the Jewish people of Jesus's time. While they share a common ancestry and some history, the Samaritans had separated from the community based in Jerusalem centuries before Jesus stopped at this particular well for a travel break. According to one scholar, "By the first century CE, Samaritans held a Torah-centered faith focused on the patriarchs, centered worship on Mount Gerizim, and looked for a messiah who would be a prophet like Moses, while the Jewish people held a broader scriptural tradition that included the prophets, centered worship in Jerusalem, and looked for a messiah-king in the line of David. Although sharing the same founding history, they currently shared nothing else, including food, drink, or utensils. In this environment, Jesus takes a break alone as the disciples go for food and meets a Samaritan woman who comes to the well for her daily water-drawing chore (verses 7-8).

"The scene is set for an encounter through which Jesus shatters social convention and incorporates a woman who is also Samaritan into his ministry. John likewise teaches that Jesus also fulfills Samaritan messianic expectations and reconciles this long-standing division."³

The shattering of social conventions brings us to item #3: "What happens when we meet someone who throws us off our game?"

This whole encounter is unusual. That starts with the fact that Jesus even talks to Photini at all, because no respectable Jewish male at that time would have been caught dead doing such a thing. But talk to her he does. He's thirsty. And, he seems to think

³ Sherri Brown, "Commentary on John 4:5-42." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-45-42-5> [accessed March 3, 2026].

that maybe they can help each other out: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water' (John 4:10, NRSV)

We can almost hear Photini do a bit of a double take in her response. Her first concern is entirely practical: he doesn't have a bucket to draw water from the well in the first place. No bucket, no drink... However, she figures out in the very next breath that he's not just talking about a literal drink of water, or the bubbling spring she might have thought he meant by the phrase "living water." It's the same pattern as we saw with the teacher Nicodemus in last week's gospel reading. Jesus talks about something common, like water, and the person with whom he's having that conversation fails to grasp that Jesus is using that common thing as a metaphor for what it means to have faith in him. Picking up on that metaphor is key. That's especially so in this first part of John, where such metaphors are critically important signs pointing to Jesus' full identity as God's "only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). Unlike so many others who are asked to take Jesus at his word and believe, and just can't quite get there, Photini can, and does.

Which brings us back to what we expect out of stories like this one, and out of our own encounters with Jesus. I don't know about you, but I certainly would think twice if a random guy approached me and demanded I help him with something in the same way he demands a drink of water from Photini. I would probably run in the opposite direction, fast, if he said something about giving me living water. But... there is just something about Jesus which allows Photini to make the split-second decision to put her assumptions about this strange Jewish man aside. That decision allows her to

embrace a whole new life; to transcend the centuries of stereotyping around race, gender, and class; and to let her humility in this moment transcend her society's ideas about who has power. The end result is a complete reversal. That would not have happened had Photini not allowed herself to even consider that this man, who'd demanded a drink from her while resting at her local well, was offering her far more than just a thank you for drawing that water. When we join her in being open to what Jesus has to offer – when we *expect* him to be outside of the limited boxes of our human experience, if you will - "...we see openings for new life that our finest reasoning, based on our old assumptions, would never have dreamed possible."⁴

⁴ Thomas H. Troeger, *Sermon Sparks: 122 Ideas to Ignite Your Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 19-20.