

John, and, as we shall see, the rest of the gospel writers, made a bold declaration about the true nature of things that N. T. Wright summed up like this: "God . . . has become king—in and through Jesus! A new state of affairs has been brought into existence. A door has been opened that nobody can shut. Jesus is now the world's rightful Lord, and all other lords are to fall at his feet."¹¹

As we move to the stories from the Gospels, it's important to remember that these stories don't begin with "Once upon a time," but with "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus . . ." (Luke 2:1–3 KJV). They are rooted in the context of empire and resistance, of oppression and defiance. To announce the birth of a new royal heir or to celebrate a military victory in a distant land, imperial messengers would issue proclamations of *evangelion*, or "good news." So when Jesus made the following announcement, quoting the prophet Isaiah, the people knew exactly what he meant:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

(LUKE 4:18–19)

Jesus takes the Resistance beyond prophecy, beyond songs of hope and lamentation, beyond satire and mockery, and beyond apocalyptic visions to declare the inauguration of a new kingdom. With his birth, teachings, death, and resurrection, Jesus has started a revolution.

It just doesn't look the way anyone expects.



THE WATER

I went to the well at noon.

Sun burning my neck, sweat stinging my eyes, I sighed to think how much heavier that water jar would seem on the journey back. Even the field mice had retreated to the cover of rocks, the sheep to the shade of a lone sycamore.

Most of the women gather at first light, when the dew still clings to the grass and the sun glows soft and pink in the sky, their laughter carrying over the countryside like birdsong as they gossip and banter, chide their toddlers and share news. In the desert, wells give and draw life, their waters evocative of the womb. Wells are where our ancestors arranged marriages, fell in love, and received word of impending births. Wells are where God starts something new.

I was not a woman who belonged at a well.

This spring was named for Jacob, but as I trudged toward it, thirsty, I thought of Tamar, as I often did. Tamar, the original cursed woman, passed from brother to brother, bearing no children, bringing nothing but death, until finally, through lurid means, she gave that family twins and our people a nation. I saw myself in her story, for I too lived in my father-in-law's house, waiting for a little boy to

become a man. That boy's mother had every reason to fear me, to hate me. After four weddings and four tragedies, I cannot blame her. Tamar's husbands were wicked, but mine were kind. They honored the law even after superstitious neighbors told them to be done with it, to cast me out into the wilderness to die. The mother, no doubt, wishes they had. Sometimes I did too.

As the sun beat down like a great unseeing eye overhead, I saw a figure seated at the well. A man. I drew closer, spied the knotted tassels on the fringe of his coat confirming he was a Jew, and felt a rush of relief. *Good. We won't have to talk.* A man in this country rarely speaks to a woman. A Jew to a Samaritan? Never.

At last I reached the well, collapsing on the other side to catch my breath. Somewhere a hawk screeched, her eyes, no doubt, on those field mice.

"Will you give me a drink?"

His voice startled me, like a crack of thunder on a clear day. For a moment, I doubted I'd heard it. What sort of Jew asked a Samaritan for water? They believed even our pitchers were unclean.

"You are a Jewish man, and I am a Samaritan woman," I said with a laugh, wary of meeting his eyes. "And you're asking me for water?"

"If you knew who I was," he answered, "you'd be asking *me* for a drink, and I would give you fresh, flowing water, water that is colder and cleaner than this. I would give you the kind of water you really crave."

Now he had my attention. In spite of my exhaustion, I stood to face him. The man was young, maybe thirty. He had no jar, rope, or buckets. He must have been traveling from Judea to Galilee, but I wondered why he journeyed without companions.

"Artesian water from this well?" I pressed. "Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. Are you saying you are better than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank

from it, along with all his children and livestock? Are you saying you know something he didn't?"

I couldn't help myself. Jews were so smug about religion. No doubt this man never dreamed a Samaritan woman thought of such things.

"Everyone who drinks water from this well will get thirsty again," he said. "But whoever drinks the water I offer will remain satisfied, for they will have a gushing spring inside of them that never runs dry."

"Well then give me some of that water!" I laughed, playing along. "Then I won't have to hike out to this well every day."

The man fell silent. Assuming I'd offended him, I prepared my bucket and lowered it into the well. Of course I planned to give the stranger the first drink. Samaritans, for all you've heard of us, honor the customs of hospitality.

"Go, call your husband and come back," he said, breaking the silence.

My jaw clenched.

"I have no husband," I said.

"Indeed you don't. You've had five husbands, haven't you? And the man you live with now is not one of them."

Five.

This man knew more than what local gossip could carry. He knew my secret. He knew *me*.

Shaking, I let the rope slip. My bucket plunged into the water, and I staggered backward.

"I see you are a prophet," I said, sitting down.

The man said nothing in reply, so for a while we just sat there together under the sun, sweating and thirsty, a strange understanding growing between us. He went to the well and pulled the bucket up.

"So tell me something," I said, recovering my courage.

"Samaritans say the place of rightful worship is that mountain over there, but Jews say it is in Jerusalem. Who is right?"

It may seem like a strange thing to ask a prophet who has just laid your life bare, naming the thing you never dared voice out loud, but if God was speaking to me through a Jew, I had some questions. The enmity between our people stretched back centuries. Though we shared a common ancestry—the same fathers of the faith, the same prophets and kings of old—time and geography had given us different cultures, different practices, different sacred places. The Jews destroyed our temple on Mount Gerizim a hundred years before I was born, then banned us from worshiping in Jerusalem after some of our people desecrated their temple with corpses. If this man was a prophet, it meant righteousness belonged to the Jews. And if righteousness belonged to the Jews, a woman like me had no place to meet with God.

"Don't worry about that," he answered, a smile in his voice. "Salvation will come through the Jews, yes, but it will be for all people. The day is coming when all the barriers between us will collapse. God is Spirit, after all, and Truth. You can't build a temple around Spirit. You can't lock Truth in a shrine. The kind of worship God wants is the kind of worship without walls."

He paused.

"But you know that already, daughter, don't you? You have known all along."

He crouched down and looked me straight in the eyes, seeing me in a way no man had ever seen me before.

"They say a Messiah will come and make all these things plain," I ventured from the ground.

"I—the one speaking to you—am he."

At that, he handed me the bucket of water. I brought it to my lips, lifted my head, and drank deep of the coolest, richest water I

ever tasted. I drank and drank and drank. I drank until I could no longer breathe.

When I finished, I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and handed the bucket back to the man, who, to my amazement, threw his head back and gulped the rest of it down, dousing his dusty face with the last splash that remained. For a moment, I doubted what I'd just witnessed. This man, this Jew—this *Messiah*—drank from my defiled cup. And with relish.

He saw my surprise and laughed, the deep belly laugh of a man who sees our religious absurdities for what they are. I joined him, all the tired and thirsty cells in my body awake with life once again. It was like giving birth and being born at the same time.

We laughed and dried our faces until we realized a crowd had gathered. At least ten men, all of them Jews, stood around us, faces stricken.

The man, whom they called Teacher, assured his friends that no laws had been broken, then told the men to prepare for a longer stay.

"We'll be feasting with Samaritans tonight," he declared.

I'm certain that in spite of myself, I beamed.

I had to tell someone, but who? My household hated me. My friends were uneducated peasants with little influence over public affairs. Would anyone believe me? Could anyone understand?

There was Miriam, of course, the slave. And Mara, the prostitute. The baker always liked a good story, and maybe those shepherd boys would too.

As more names and faces came to my mind, my feet moved faster. I ran over the hillside and past the sycamore.

The widow next door could host a banquet. The blind beggar from the alley would certainly come. Perhaps the lepers of Ebal would join us for supper, and maybe a tax collector or two.

My feet pounded the ground as the town came into view.

We could gather figs, bake bread, drink wine, I thought. We could fill a house with hungry and thirsty people, people ready to laugh again, and eat, and start something new. We could put flowers on the table. We could sing old songs.

I made it all the way to Sychar before I even noticed.

I'd left my water jar behind.

GOSPEL STORIES

I met Jesus at the dinner table. A vast, shaker-style oak, the three-leafed centerpiece of our modest family home had been handmade and special ordered to match a set of eight chairs my mother scored in a bargain at the legendary Woody's Chair Shop in Spruce Pine, North Carolina. "Woody" chairs are, to this day, constructed using a lathe and mortise machine from the 1800s and are held together without any nails or glue, just the shrinking and expanding of the wood. John F. Kennedy owned a Woody; there's one on display at the Smithsonian, another at the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art. For two career educators, that dining set represented quite the splurge—eighty bucks a chair in 1984, according to my mother—so my parents gathered people around it every chance they got, filling their Woodys with hungry college students and friends from church, trimming the table with mismatched flatware and second-hand place mats.

It was at that table, over a steaming plate of spaghetti or pork chops or some other weekday meal, that I learned to pray, "Jesus,