

# MORE THAN MESSIAH

**John 4:1-26 NRSV**

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**First Christian Church**

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Now when Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”<sup>2</sup> —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—<sup>3</sup> he left Judea and started back to Galilee. <sup>4</sup> But he had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup> A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” <sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, “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.” <sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” <sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” <sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” <sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; <sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” <sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” <sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

In every lifetime, there are certain moments and conversations and events that challenge and often change the way we look at the world. In many ways we are defined by those encounters. They alter our perspective.

For example, I am forever defined by my relationship with Texas A&M. Long before I became a student, I was the daughter of an Aggie—William H. Gaston, Class of 48. The annual family pilgrimage to Kyle Field, home of the Fightin’ Texas Aggies, began when I was a little girl. My parents raised me to see the world through an Aggie perspective.

If you’re an Aggie, you are perpetually prepared to take the field. That’s why the students stand during the football game. We are the 12th man—just like E. King Gill at the Dixie Classic in 1922 when the number of injuries in the first half cleared the bench. At halftime Aggie coach Dana Bible waved Gill over to the sideline and said, “Boy, it doesn’t look like I’m going to have enough players to finish the game.” So Gill suited up and waited throughout the second half just in case.

If you’re an Aggie, you’re always ready to take the field. How that Aggie perspective is demonstrated in war time is the stuff of history books. What that means for parents raising their children or community leaders or innovators is something else entirely. But it is how Aggies look at the world.

The gospel of John reminds us that Jesus came to change the way we look at the world. In particular, he challenges how we understand God at work in the world. There is an unmistakable sense of disruption in the encounters we are reading. Last week Jesus met with a man of the law, a leader in Jerusalem, and Jesus suggested that this learned man didn’t even know how the journey of faith begins. “You must be born of the Spirit” Jesus insisted. Never in a lifetime studying the Law of Moses

had Nicodemus come across the concept. Jesus was shaking the foundation on which Nicodemus had lived his life!

Today in his conversation with a Samaritan women we are reminded that one way Jesus challenges the religious establishment is to ignore the rules. That is somewhat shock to the woman at the well who has been taught that one function of religion is to keep people apart.

Once again the conversation includes double meanings, this time around the notion of water and thirst. But this time the conversation moves in a different way. Here's Jesus in verse 10:

*(Verse 10) "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."*

The woman speaks to the story she knows from birth about the water in that well.

*(Verse 11) "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"*

This Samaritan woman knows the stories of her tribe and what makes that location holy ground. In fact, in Jacob she shares a spiritual ancestor with Jesus. Now they have made a connection and Jesus takes the conversation deeper still.

*(Verse 13) Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."*

At this point the Samaritan woman hears Jesus extend an invitation to a different way of life.

*“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty, or have to keep coming here to draw water.”*

It’s remarkable. This woman at the well doesn’t miss a beat. At every turn, as Jesus moves the conversation deeper, the woman is right there, eager for the conversation to be more than it appears on the surface.

As the conversation becomes more personal, we see that despite the challenges in the woman’s life she is a person of faith. She senses Jesus is a man of God and assumes him to be a prophet, she speaks about the faith of her people, and reveals that she too is waiting for the clarity and understanding that the Messiah will bring when he arrives.

*“I know that Messiah is coming,” she says.*

*Jesus answers, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”*

Perhaps because of her open heart and her willingness to engage in such a weighty conversation, we can imagine that conversion is already underway in this woman’s life, but it is by no means complete. She still has questions that need to be answered. She rushes back to the village to tell her story and asks one of her questions out loud, “He can’t be the Messiah, can he?”

It’s one of the things I love about this story. She doesn’t wait until she had all the T’s crossed and the I’s dotted to witness. She shares only as much as she has seen and experienced and she speaks out loud the questions that still remain because that is an authentic witness.

It takes courage after all in the midst of a faith community to speak out loud the questions we still have, to admit there are doubts, to clench our fists and stomp our feet when the prayers are not answered and the healing doesn’t come and the

peace that passes all understanding seems to evaporate. Maybe we can't even remember the last time we experienced that kind of peace.

15 years ago a pastor and Christian writer named Brian McLaren was fed up with the way he had been taught to see God at work in the world. He served a community that used faith to keep some people out, offered the same, tired, overly simplistic answers to life's difficult questions, and frowned on questions. It had taken a while for this pastor to get to what seemed like the end of the road. Brian thought he had two options—to continue practicing and promoting a version of Christianity that he had deep reservations about or (2) to leave the Christian ministry—and perhaps his faith—altogether. But what he found out was there was a third option—to learn to be a Christian in a whole new way. That's the subject of his book *A New Kind of Christian*.

Brian discovered that the disruption he was feeling, that the faith perspective that had once been such a good fit was no longer working, was actually a sign that God was at work in his life. He was under construction. He writes about what he learned from a colleague named Alan Roxburgh who describes a process that God uses to keep our faith fresh and vital so that we are always learning and growing, never stagnant.

At any given time, according to Roxburgh, can be in one of 5 stages in our faith journey:

1. Stability--life is fine, the structure is sound, current doctrines explain everything adequately, and the questions are few.
2. Discontinuity--we move into this stage when problems begin to arise and the way things have always been doesn't seem to be working. Some of the structures we once took for granted seem to break down.
3. Disembedding—as the problems increase with old system we reach a time when we begin to pull away. We may leave behind some of the details that no longer

serve us but at this point we haven't found anything new to replace what we're giving up. At this point we aren't attached to anything.

4. Transition—this is landing in a new reality. At this point we don't have a new system yet but we have a new setting and we begin to get our bearings. This is Dorothy with her house on the ground and the yellow brick road out in front. And she has her welcome party—Glenda the Good Witch and the Munchkins.
5. Reformation—now the new perspective is taking shape, a world view infused with equal measures of hope and courage.

We can use these five stages to describe the dawning of Christianity in the first century. It helps us understand the encounters in the gospel of John. In each episode, in these double meaning conversations, we see Jesus changing the context and challenging expectations within the faith community. In one encounter after another, Jesus disembeds from the old system by declaring that he has come to seek and to save the lost, which is a top priority for God but no longer seems important to the religious establishment.

One commentary that I read this week described how the messianic expectation by the time of Jesus had become corrupted and distorted by the culture and politics of his day. Any seemingly insurmountable problem that the common people faced would be meant with the cynical comment, "Let's just wait for the Messiah." Nobody was trying to fix anything.

John suggests in these encounters that Jesus is the Messiah and more. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise and he is also God's presence here and now among people who are looking for the Messiah.

I told you about Brian McLaren's search for authentic faith which he writes about in his book *A New Kind of Christian*.

If you are living with some doubts and questions of your own right now, if what you were taught how God works in the world no longer works for you, here are a few questions from Brian McLaren:

What if God is actually behind the disillusionment you are feeling?

What if God uses the frustration we feel to “move us out of Egypt” so to speak, and into the wilderness, because it’s time for the next chapter of our adventure?

What if it’s time for a new phase in the unfolding mission God intends for the people who seek to know, love and serve God?

May God help us to be a community always eager for new encounters with the One who comes to challenge faith as we know it!