

**“The Woman at the Well”**  
**The Rev. James S. Ward**

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Three years ago the wreck of a P-38 was lifted out of the Mediterranean Sea off Marseille. It was the remains of the plane crash that sixty year before had killed Antoine de Saint-Exupery in 1944 shortly after he'd finished his famous book, the Little Prince, a favorite among children of all ages. He is remembered for a number of quotes like, *"Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."*

In his early twenties he was one of the pioneer flyers who flew a open cock-pit biplane on mail runs across the Sahara desert, dodging curious natives below trying to shoot this strange sight out of the air. Once he survived a crash in the desert nearly dying of dehydration. He also wrote, *"What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well."* He tells the story of flying a couple of bedouin Sheiks from Morocco one day to see the French alps. They landed near the foot of Mont Blanc and sat watching in amazement before a cataract the likes of which they had never imagined. As the shadows grew long, he tried to get them back into the plane for the return trip. "We want to wait until it's over," they explained.

*"For true love is inexhaustible; the more you give, the more you have. And if you go to draw at the true fountainhead, the more water you draw, the more abundant is its flow."* St. Exupery. Jesus promises to the Samaritan woman at the well that if she drinks "the water that he will give will become a fountain gushing up to eternal life."

But much of our life like hers is spent journeying back and forth to the well. Cautiously avoiding certain people and joining with others who are safe. This Samaritan woman goes at the hottest time of day. Something about every other woman in town has her hiding out. Of course, she's been married five times and is currently living with a sixth man. She has had plenty of time to alienate or scandalize every family in the city most of whom she been related to by marriage. She has internalized their judgments of her and has no need for their harsh words, sometimes to each other behind their hands and sometimes directly to her right out in the open.

She is a pariah, a witch, the town whore, the crone. It's them against her and her against them. So when this handsome stranger wanders into town, tired and dusty from his travels she is cautious about how she regards him sitting there at the well. The best parallel for me is the encounter of Jesus in Mark's Gospel with the Gerasene demoniac who hails him with, 'What have you to do with us?' Like that poor boy so possessed by his community that he identifies himself as *legion*, and usually chained for his own good, she embodies, she carries inside her the entire town. Her internal desert perfectly captures their communal landscape, the delicate aridity of their lives.

Samaritans were the original second class citizens. So she was an outcast among outcasts. Not pure bred Israelites they were excluded from the covenant people. No wonder they set up rival worship. But Jesus is as disinterested in their rivalry as he is with the taboo against having contact with them, or that against men being alone with women. Instead of arguing religion with

her, he talks about 'living water' and promises that if she drinks it she will never thirst again. It's as if she were all of a sudden transported to find herself in a Harry Potter novel, or sitting in front of a water-fall she could never imagine. She says "give me this water."

And so just by asking she becomes the instrument of salvation for her entire community. Indeed, she becomes the emblem of the church's mission to the gentiles. In that regard all of us are in her debt, we are all her children. But that she should be chosen for this is not as strange as it might seem. After all, as St. Paul tells us, "God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are." (1 Corinthians 1:28) God chose slaves in Egypt, a shepherd boy to be king, a poor unwed mother to reveal his Word. God appears to favor the weak outcasts over the powerful insiders. As Saint Exupery says, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

At the risk of being accused of plagiarism, I want to talk, in the midst of this political "silly season," about the dynamics of hope. The hope that enables people to overcome the internalized rejection, alienation and disapproval that keeps so many of us ineffective in our communities. It is the faith of Jesus that changes her situation, in extending to her significant attention and concern, not as just another exploitative man, but as someone who truly encounters her—beneath her social status and even her attempts to keep him at a safe distance by arguing religion or flattering him for his prophetic insight—he sees her as an equal person. It is not so much her faith in him but his faith in her that awakens in her hope. And that hope enables her to return to her community as someone no longer driven by their harsh judgments to stay hidden in the shadows, to stay in her place, but to openly and directly tell that community about herself and how they had treated her. What else can, "He told me everything I have ever done" refer to. What else can it mean but that hope makes her risk more suffering by confronting her despisers. As Saint Exupery says, "*Of what worth are convictions that bring not suffering?*"

This is the gift that those of us who are older have for our younger brothers and sisters. We've endured. Paul puts it so memorably: "suffering leads to endurance, endurance to character, character yields hope that takes us beyond our tendency to disappointment." You can read it in our weather beaten faces, in the engaging, accepting warmth of our smiles. We've lived, we've seen a few things. We have a perspective that enables us to genuinely give testimony to the fact that "God's love has been poured into our hearts." So we can be confident that since "we have been reconciled we will also be saved" from whatever appears to threaten us.

That confidence enabled the Samaritan woman to return to the community that had rejected her and that she had rejected, not to take vengeance on them or set them straight, trading accusation for accusation and judgment for judgment, but to tell them what had happened to her, about her hope. Her message was simple. It's no coincidence that her message is the same as Jesus at the beginning of John's gospel. It is simply "come and see." Once their scapegoat, she has now become their leader bringing them together no longer in their condemnation of her but in their curiosity, and in her hope.

*"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."* Saint-Exupery