

“Unexpected Grace”  
Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11;  
John 4:5-42

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What did you expect? Have you ever heard anyone say that? Or maybe you've said that to somebody. Somebody did something that you thought was foolish, they got a result that wasn't quite hoped for, and you said, "Well, what did you expect?" .

What did you expect? Our expectations guide us through the day. We expect the next thing, what our actions will be, and where they are going to lead us. I would suspect that the woman who was coming to the well that day had certain expectations about what would happen. It would be hot, she would get her water, and she'd be even hotter going back home carrying the heavy load. It was about noon. I doubt she expected very many other people to be there, if any. Then there was this guy that was there. Her expectations were disrupted, changed.

One of the things that really creates our expectations are the context in which we have those particular expectations. In fact, the context is often what gives us a sense of the expectations. If we see a piece of pizza on a plate as opposed to lying in the road, we're going to see it very differently. The context matters.

Think about the context of her coming to the well in her society. That context matters. It's 2,000 years ago. I really don't have a good conception of what it really means to have to go get water every day and bring it back to my house, and to do it in a desert climate. Then, why is she doing it at noon? There's a lot of thought that she's probably doing it at noon because she isn't one of the upstanding folks in the society. She isn't well-respected. She's going there so she doesn't have to be there when there are a lot of other people there, so she won't have to hear the side comments, perhaps.

So there are all these expectations around her and as she gets there. Then here's this Jewish guy sitting by the well, and she's a Samaritan, and she knows what that means. It means that she should stay as far away as possible because she's just going to see the derision in his face. Again, that expectation is broken. First he speaks to her, which is a little outlandish, and not only does he speak to her, but he asks for something. He asks for a drink of water, something she actually would give him. There's a whole bunch we could do with that, but that's enough to begin to recognize that something unexpected is happening in the midst of this moment.

I got to wondering, was she the first woman who had come to the well? What if a more upstanding woman had come and saw Jesus, and Jesus had said the same thing? Would she have just shied away and left? One of the unexpected things here is that the woman speaks back to Jesus, partly because she's surprised, but she does. It's a little unsettling, if you're a Jew anyway.

What kind of conceptions do we have, what kind of context do we put this whole thing in? If you look at the history of the art of the Woman at the Well, you can pretty much see the different contexts. You might have a Greek urn, you might have a middle ages description of it, and there are more modern versions. We begin to bring our context to that description of the woman at the well, as well. We wonder about her journey and we bring our own journey as we think about the encounter that happened there.

As we think about her journey, the conversation goes on in an unexpected way. Already, if we came to this and asked, "What do you expect?" our expectations are in some ways tweaked, if not broken. Unexpected things are happening. As I was reading through this again, it almost felt like at times Jesus was bring up one thing, and she would bring up another thing. He would bring up something; she would bring up something else. It's a little bit confusing, and yet in this encounter, she is beginning to discover something. She is discovering a God that comes into her life in an unexpected way, and she begins to wonder what that is about.

What does it mean when he says, "I'm going to give you living water?" Does he say he's going to replace the well with a hydrant? No. We all know at this point that he's beginning to talk about something that's a little more metaphorical. It's not literally water. What is he bringing? Is that how she gets to worship in spirit and in truth? Because he's suggesting that he's going to give her something that's going to give her life and so she's thinking about that life in relationship to God. So she says, "We worship here and you worship there," and there's this conversation. But isn't our worship about our relationship with God? What he's doing is entering with grace into her life, all of a sudden leading her into a place she didn't expect.

There are times in our lives when we say, "If somebody really knew me, they really wouldn't want to talk to me." My guess is that's this woman coming to the well. "If he really knew me, he wouldn't really want to talk to me. He's already broken this thing about women and Samaritans, but he doesn't really know me." And then he shows that he does. There's something incredible about that. He really knows me, and he's still talking to me. In fact, she goes back to tell everybody, "He knows everything about me!" Somebody knows everything about me and is still willing to talk to me—there's grace. Somebody who knows me, knows my circumstances, knows my lowliness, and still is willing to talk to me and offer me living water—living water that is a healing, a reconciliation. There is a way that in Jesus meeting the woman at the well, he is allowing God's arms to reach around her. She goes back and the disciples return. There's more context there. More people come out and listen, and they are able to say it wasn't just the woman's words. Maybe there was a thirst in this town for what Jesus had to offer.

It's a wonderful story in that way. There's more to it and we can't do it all. They are willing to come out and listen. She was willing to listen, to hear and to drink in what he had to say, to begin to get that living water, to understand that even as vulnerable and

crazy as her life had been, God still loves her. There's an offering of love and grace that she might worship in spirit and in truth.

Let's go out on the street now and ask anybody, "Do you want to come in and worship in spirit and in truth?" What I'm saying is our context today makes that a little awkward. You see, her context was one thing, but we bring our context to this as well, and that's what I'm struggling with. She was willing to listen. It feels like my context says that stuff is crazy. The crazy people are the ones who do spirituality stuff. And what is truth? What is reality in our context? And what does God have to do with it?

She was able to hear because she was able to let God break through her expectations. When Jesus spoke into her life she answered. I often wonder how many things I've got in the way. I've got a nice life. I've got friends and family. I've got a lot of good things. How does God speak through those, because lots of times it seems like that is the thing that's hardest to get through, to open up, and to let go of. We put up barriers around us to hide who we really are, and in doing that I think we also put up barriers to hearing.

When Jesus offers the woman living water, she's able to hear he's offering something incredible. I think the problem of Lent is just that. I want this, God is offering that. I think this is better, and don't realize that what God offers is better. I've got running water at my house; I don't need more water. With all the rain we've been having, there's plenty of water everywhere right now. It's in my heart that I need the living water. What about you? Amen.