

The Well Is Deep

(#3 in the “*Living in the Thin Places*” Epiphany series)

*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.”
The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep.
Where do you get that living water?”
(John 4:10-11)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 4th Sunday after Epiphany, **February 3, 2019**
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During Epiphany my sermon series is focusing on the early chapters of John’s gospel, where we witness the wattage surging, the lumens cast on Jesus incrementally intensifying, identifying him as one sent from heaven to bring light to the darkness.

I’m describing these early encounters with Jesus as *Thin Place* moments, an ancient Celtic term describing experiences when it seems that the veil separating heaven and earth has become porous, intimations of heaven seeping through to our awareness.

These *Thin Places* can be sought or unsought. Last Sunday we read of Nicodemus, who sought out Jesus, albeit by night, seeking privacy. We often seek *Thin Place* experiences. Worship, by definition, is a quest to experience God with particular immediacy. And pilgrimage is the seeker mentality on steroids, whether embarking a journey to the Holy Land, on a retreat such as an Emmaus Walk, or to a monastery for prayer and study.

Often, though, our most profound *Thin Place* moments are unexpected encounters in the midst of the ordinary, such as this woman going about her chores, who meets Jesus at Jacob’s Well. The Samaritan woman had, unawares, happened upon a *Thin Place of Unsought Transformation*.

Meeting God is always transformational. *Thin Places* along our spiritual journey can certainly be euphoric, but they are always more. Moses at the Burning Bush was called to action. Paul on the Damascus Road was sent on a mission.

Jesus is uninterested in this woman having a merely mystical encounter, so that she will come away excited. Jesus intends the meeting as a call to holiness for the woman, he moving the conversation from the theological squabble she uses as a diversion -- upon which mountain should we worship? -- to which set of morals should guide our living.

To this end he meddles, saying, “*Call your husband.*” He clearly knows the answer before he asks the question. Feeling trapped, she tries to divert the conversation into the

theological realm. Which mountain produces more *Thin Places*? Is it mine in Samaria, or yours in Jerusalem?

Jesus wasn't interested in debate. How easily our theological pronouncements can cloak the real issues God is calling us to address. Theology itself can become, not a tool for illumination but a handy means of obfuscation.

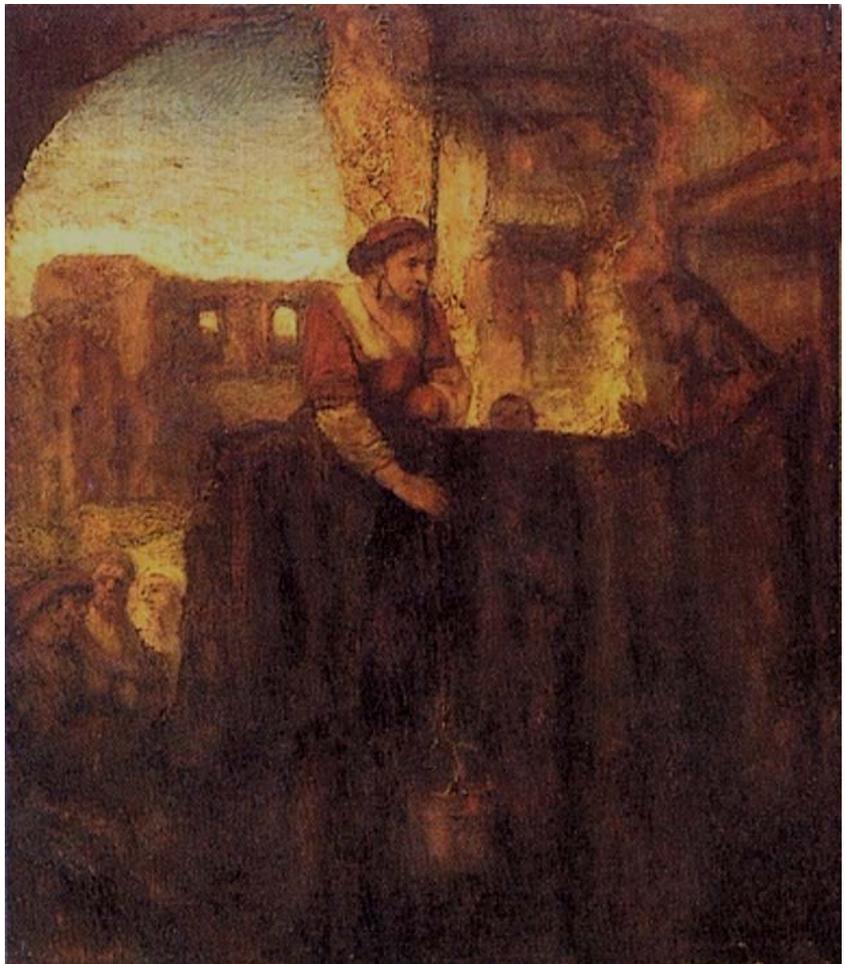
Jacob's well was already in Jesus' time regarded as a holy site and is vital to John's telling of this story. As she honed in on the significance of these precise geographical coordinates, Jesus side-stepped the debate, casting light instead on her past and on the possibility of living differently.

I've been intrigued by a Rembrandt painting from 1659, *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*, which today is in Berlin. In searching great works of art which have sought to capture this Thin Place moment in John 4, I found this painting incredibly different and worthy of comment.

I found that in most paintings of this scene, the well of Samaria is imagined in colorful, creative ways, buckets and jars prominent. I was first struck with this obvious difference, Rembrandt putting the well and the bucket in the shadows.

All the light is upon the woman, which is how she must have felt, too, when Jesus began to talk about her past.

If her right arm wasn't extended and pulling up the bucket, one might almost miss the bucket, but it's there. I see in her right extended forearm, right in the middle of the painting so that you can make out every crease in her sleeve, a hint that the woman's GPS systems are sharpened as a defense of her community and her traditions, drawing from the well of her past.



She alone is fully illuminated. We know, of course, that she is talking to Jesus, but Rembrandt paints him in the shadows, without detail, just enough of a shimmer of light across his face so that you can make out, if you look closely, his profile, his ear, his hairline, his cheeks, his neck and shoulder.

We are still many weeks from the Transfiguration, Epiphany's last Sunday when Jesus' clothing and face will shine like the sun. This painting is far from that, yet here are the first intimations of his glory.

The Samaritan woman is clearly center stage. There are other figures in the recesses with various degrees of illumination. Is that a head poking up there, right in the middle of the well between the woman and Jesus? Yes, I think so, but without detail. And there, down on the left . . . do you see the faces of two, no, three who are talking, uninterested in the *Thin Place* the woman has happened upon?

Amazing how one can be moved by a *Thin Place* moment, when those around see little and feel less. It's not their time. It's hers time. That's true in every worship gathering, I suppose. Some of you may be having a *Thin Place* moment because of something going on in your life just now which has prepared your heart and mind to respond to just this passage from John 4. Others may be here in wonderful faithfulness and enjoying worship, yet the biggest question to be answered is, "*Hey, honey, where do you want to eat lunch?*"

So yes, others are there, but Rembrandt shines the light where Jesus shines the light of epiphany -- on this woman. He illuminates her past. Look closely. All the light seems to flow from Jesus' fingers. Do you see that? His left hand seems to be the Alpha point from which light emanates so that behind Jesus and below Jesus, all is dark.

And, how many the fingers? Five. How many the husbands? Five. It's as if he is asking her, "*Will you be brave enough to walk from your past?*" Her past is illuminated, but look how sparse it seems, how hollow. Like the façade of a war-torn building, there's something fake about it. Windows are open, but open to what? There is only emptiness behind.

Rembrandt has painted what can be true in so much of our lives, especially in the life of an addict, a hollow emptiness in the things once we thought would give us pleasure, joy, fulfillment, meaning. "*Like the woman at the well, I was seeking, for things that could not satisfy. And then I heard my Savior speaking, draw from my well, that never shall run dry.*"

One more thing. The woman is leaning in slightly. Is this to brace herself to pull up the bucket she yet clutches, a signal that she hasn't let go of her past, bracing to resist Jesus' call? Or, is she recognizing in the slight glimmer of Jesus' face a *Thin Place*, leaning in to take a first step toward Him, to emerge from her past?

It's a question we all face when the *Thin Place* shines on us. Are we bracing ourselves against change, or are we leaning in to the call, stepping toward new life in Christ?

As we receive Holy Communion this morning, let's imagine it as an invitation to step forth from the past and to draw from the well of grace that is so deep, and filled with Living Water.

Dear Lord, the well is deep. Give us buckets, we pray, to draw from so vast a reservoir of divine love as we will find at this Holy Table. Amen.