

“Encountering Jesus, Encountering Ourselves”
March 8, 2026

John 4:5-42
Jeremiah 2:4-13

We are now a week into a war with Iran. Some hesitate to use that word, but the president has no problem calling it a war. The destruction and death certainly look like a war to me. It is expanding. There is little end in sight. And the purpose of all of this unclear.

It was reported last week that “Without any clear message coming from the White House with regard to the purpose of the Iran war, U.S. military commanders have turned to Jesus, apparently telling American troops that the war is ‘biblically sanctioned.’”

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation has received over 100 complaints from U.S military personnel stationed across the Middle East. One “noncommissioned officer reported that their commander had ‘urged us to tell our troops that this was ‘all part of God’s divine plan’ and he specifically referenced numerous citations out of the Book of Revelation referring to Armageddon and the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

“He said that ‘President Trump has been anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon and mark his return to Earth.’”ⁱ

This is nonsense, of course—dangerous nonsense standing in place of considered objectives clearly communicated to the American people and those who fight in our name and with our financial support.

I chose this morning’s text long before the first bombs were dropped on Iran, before the first Iranian and American deaths occurred. At first, this story from the Gospel of John might seem far removed from our concerns this morning. But this story is a revelation of sorts—it reveals a Jesus who offers life, not death, grace, not judgment.. It, too, has been misunderstood and misused. In the face of such great uncertainty in our world and great misunderstanding of scripture, it helps us this morning to listen carefully to that extended encounter between Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan women, often referred to simply as “the woman at the well.”

Throughout scripture, wells and water are vitally important.

It’s said that “Almost every aspect of daily life in ancient Israel involved water: agriculture, animal husbandry, cooking, personal hygiene, and of course drinking. People collected water from natural sources such as free-running streams, fountains, and springs or from sources such as reservoirs, cisterns, and, of course, wells. Wells were often in central locations; they were places for socializing, places where travelers could water their camels. Women were generally tasked with getting water from the well, usually in the evening” or in the early morning.”ⁱⁱ

So, it would not be unexpected to find Jesus, on his way through Samaria, coming to a well. As always with Jesus, however, what happens is surprising, even life-changing, life-giving.

John's Gospel tells us Jesus *had to pass through* Samaria. That expression suggests that something like the will of God is involved here, something that could not be avoided.

Samaria, of course, was an entire region to be avoided. You remember that Jews and Samaritans hated each other. The “good Samaritan” was an oxymoron—everyone knew you couldn't be both good and a Samaritan.

Yet, here he is, the thirsty Jesus, an outsider pausing at a well in the foreign territory of Samaria. And here is this woman, at the well in an unexpected way and at an unexpected time: by herself in the noontime heat of the day.

At the well Jesus behaves very much like—well, very much like Jesus. He violates all the usual social rules. He talks with a woman. He talks with a despised Samaritan. From the beginning to the end of this story, Jesus transcends conventional expectations and challenges the way things are.ⁱⁱⁱ He shows a love for people far beyond what might be considered appropriate.

He turns to this woman—and a Samaritan woman at that—and asks for a drink. A stranger with basic human needs, he sets aside all the social strictures, he ignores the barriers of race and gender and religion that would separate.

As he often does, Jesus engages in a bit of word play with this unnamed woman, offering her “living water.” “Living water” can mean fresh spring water or it can mean life-giving water. Only slowly does the Samaritan woman begin to understand that the “living water” Jesus offers is associated with the gift of the Spirit of God.

The living water that Jesus offers is openness to others, welcome to the stranger, hospitality to those on the margins of society. Water goes where it will. It is not stopped. And as it goes, it brings life in many ways. Living water courses through us and on toward others, bring more life to all as it flows. Like this woman, only slowly do we also come to understand.

Jesus and this woman speak of many things including “ethnic difference, theological difference, the purpose and meaning of life, the economic and social conditions in which they find themselves, and how to live when your life becomes illuminated by the truth.” They do not talk about sin or immorality, although that is how *this story* has been misunderstood and misused for centuries. This is a story of one person encountering Jesus, and in doing so, being able to be honest about herself and coming to know Jesus in a deeper way. In fact, as Amy Frykholm has said, “in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Samaritan woman comes to be called ‘Photine,’ the illuminated one. She is celebrated as a person who, after meeting Jesus and telling her neighbors about her discovery, traveled around the Mediterranean world preaching the gospel.”^{iv}

So, the public theologian and Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor says that: “By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who he is. By confirming her true identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens. The Christ is the one in whose presence you know who you really are—the good and bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. The Christ is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is—who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises—speaking to you like someone you have known all your life, bubbling up in your life like a well that needs no dipper, so that you go back to face people you thought you could never face

again, speaking to them as boldly as he spoke to you. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.”^v

In the presence of Christ, we come to know ourselves at a depth not otherwise possible. This is where I want to turn from this story for a few moments this morning. The long reading from the Gospel meant there wasn’t space in our bulletin or time in our worship for the usual Old Testament lesson this morning. But when I hear of Jesus offering living water, I remember the words of the prophet, Jeremiah, who imagined God lamenting about the people:

They have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves
cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

Is not this who we are as individuals—and perhaps even as a nation?

We always prefer our own ways to the gracious ways of God.

We prefer our own failed actions to the merciful gifts of God.

And so, we are confronted with the realization of who we are becoming—indeed who we already are.

Our politics have become filled with animosity. We are quick to declare that “those who are not with us” are “cowards” or “treasonous.”

Our nation, which has been a place of refuge, calling out to other nations: “Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” has twice elected a leader whose main promise is to keep people out and send people back.

We have militarized the streets of our own cities.

To justify our actions, we are now told that we have been in a perpetual state of war with Iran for 47 years.

Speaking to another nation, long ago, the prophet told them:

They had failed to remember God’s faithful deliverance from Egypt.

They had polluted their land with their idolatry.

Their religious leaders lacked all knowledge of God.

Another nation, long ago.

We can't draw direct connections between ancient Israel and our own nation in the twenty-first century—and we shouldn't try. Iran is not Armageddon. Our president is not the anointed of God. But if we listen and if we are wise, we might still hear the word of God speaking to us:

We, too, forget our origins.

In the midst of conflict, we are quick to jettison our principles.

Our leaders—and especially our religious leaders—seem to lack a sense of the holy in the world, a sense of value.

We have rejected living water—freedom, welcome, openness, respect for all people—for a suspicion that closes up, for a fear that tears down—for cracked cisterns that hold no water.

“My people have rejected me, a source of living water.”

The God who speaks through Jeremiah seems more sad than angry, more perplexed than judgmental. This is the God who continues to seek out relationship with us, who continues to call to us—even when we have strayed far from what is good, even when we have rejected a source of living water.

We hear questioning, listening, and patient waiting for an answer in both the God who speaks through Jeremiah and the Jesus who sits by the well in Samaria.

In our thirst—in our fear, our anger, our self-righteousness—we have polluted our own water and drunk from streams that have neither satisfied nor given life.

We have done this over and over again.

Here is the good news:

The living God, the God of ancient Israel, the God of Exodus freedom and prophetic judgment, the God made known in Jesus knows this, knows the ways that we fail and fall—and keeps offering living water.

God speaks, not to condemn but to give life. God keeps reminding us of our past as a way of calling us to present and future goodness.

Grace tells us that even now we can choose the right. When we have rejected God, now, even now, we can turn again to the source of living water.

Living water speaks of grace.

If we can find reservoirs of life and love that are available in human relationships—and from time to time we do just that—it is not difficult to begin to search for the source of these gifts: a source of life, a source of love that is eternal and intensely personal, a deep well or a fountain of living water. This source is what we call “God.”

And when we experience this source, is it so strange for us to envision one life lived among us who was totally alive, completely loving, perfectly being what he was created to be. In this life, all that God is might be seen, met, engaged, experienced. This life we call “the Christ.”

This God is still at work among us, helping us to see what we really are like. Seeing ourselves as who we are, we can come at last to know ourselves for what we are—people called to a new way of life in Jesus Christ: that is, grasped by the God who won't let go and won't give up on us in spite of all the ways we turn our backs each day.

Scripture keeps telling us that what we want, what we are looking for, what we need, is right there, beside us, usually unnoticed, unseen: the risen Christ, unrecognized by those closest to him. Living water in a stranger at the well.

There is grace for us all—which is at least the place to start as we move through this time seeking understanding, seeking meaning. There is grace for us all.

Await it in confidence.

Acknowledge it in gratitude.

Share it generously.

ⁱ <https://newrepublic.com/post/207270/military-leaders-iran-war-donald-trump-jesus-armageddon>

ⁱⁱ Julie Bidmead, “Women and Wells in the Hebrew Bible,” https://www.bibleodysey.org/articles/women-and-wells-in-the-hebrew-bible/#google_vignette

ⁱⁱⁱ O’Day, John, NIB

^{iv} Amy Frykholm, “Living Water: Third Sunday in Lent,” *Journey with Jesus*, Published: 1 March 2026

^v Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Christian Century*, February 28, 1996.