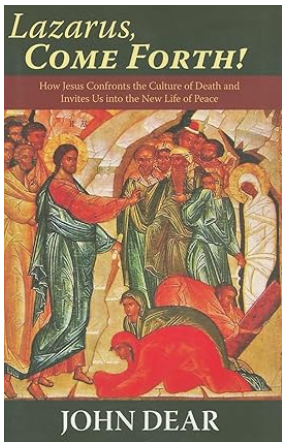
Excerpt Page for Lent 3 — March 8, 2026

Theme for Lent: "Called Out from Our Cultures of Death to God's Reign of Life"

Excerpt from John Dear's book on the Gospel of John, *Lazarus, Come Forth!: How Jesus Confronts the Culture of Death and Invites Us into the New Life of Peace* (Orbis, 2011), pp. 25-26.



In chapter 4 we encounter another figure, an unnamed Samaritan woman. In the heat of the day she trudges to fetch water at the ancient well of Jacob. And there she meets Jesus, who engages her in the longest dialogue in all the Gospels. The two overcome formidable barriers: the cultural barrier between men and women and the other between Samaritan and Judean. He takes the initiative and shows his vulnerability; what he has yet to say to anyone else he says to her. He is the Christ, the bearer of the nature of God, who offers spirit and truth beyond borders, beyond provincialism, beyond cultures. Spirit and truth are available to all. Drink and you will live.

It is an offer that piques her interest. He offers her liberation from a narrow ethnic and national identity. She is the beloved daughter of the universal God, she now realizes, free to live in love with all her sisters and brothers. Unlike Nicodemus, she grasps the idea and then runs off to the village to tell of the man at the well "who told me all about myself."

I believe that Jesus wants to have that same spiritual/political conversation with each of us. He invites us all beyond our narrow self-understandings — that egocentric sense of ourselves based on ethnic, cultural, and national distinctions. Until these are transcended we cannot claim our true identities as sons and daughters of God. Until then, we can't very well love those outside the "tribe Jesus calls us to a broader vision. He bids us to come alive and see everyone as a brother or sister, each one a child of God. And together live life to the full.

But to take Jesus at his word requires that we turn our backs to the culture of death. And it requires us in turn to be receptive to new possibilities — a bigger God, a worthy identity. Letting Jesus reveal himself, accepting the nonviolent God of spirit and truth, seeing ourselves as children of God, rejecting false identities the culture imposes on us — these will move us toward social and political freedom. Which is to say, above all else we'll forsake the violence of whatever culture we find ourselves in. And likely we'll run off to proclaim our new discovery. Exhilarated and hopeful we'll understand ourselves more deeply, sense our calling and direction more clearly. Every other interest will pale in comparison, and we'll want to drop everything for this chance at discipleship, this chance to join the campaign to heal and disarm our brothers and sisters, that all may enter the new country of peace.

Excerpt from Jennifer Garcia Barshaw's *John for Normal People*, pages 53-57.

In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (4:1-42), we find the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in the Gospels. It is astonishing that the dialogue happens between a man and a woman — such conversations would only occur between spouses or family members — but the real shocker is that the woman is a Samaritan. For centuries, Samaritans and Jews occupied neighboring lands and practiced similar religions while actively expressing feelings of animosity toward one another. The origin of the Samaritan people remains a mystery, but ancient Jewish explanations of Samaritan origins were overwhelmingly negative. The prevailing Jewish explanation of Jesus's time associates the Samaritans with the Cutheans, descendants of the colonists referred to in 2 Kings 17:24-41. Supposedly, when the northern tribes of Israel were led into captivity by the Assyrians, settlers were sent from Cutha (near Babylon) to populate Samaria, the area where the Israelites had lived. These peoples then adapted Israelite religion into their own practices and formed a faith that eventually revolved around the Torah and their own temple. . . . Archaeological evidence suggests the Samaritans remained at least as monotheistic as Israelites, whatever their origins, so the negative appraisals of Samaritans we find in our Bible do not take into account the full picture. They should have been more like Israel's siblings than enemies, but that is not the story history tells. The

Jewish–Samaritan enmity climaxed in 128 BCE when John Hyrcanus, high priest and Hasmonean ruler of the Jews, conquered the Samaritan capital city of Shechem and later destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerazim. It is not surprising, then, that these groups remained bitter enemies at least until the first century CE.

What is surprising, though, is that Jesus would cut through Samaria while fleeing the religious forces that were hostile to him in Judea. He stops at a well in the heat of the day and asks a woman for water. After she responds with incredulity that he would want a drink from her, Jesus proceeds to speak about the living water she could receive from him. The woman's reply, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well?" focuses on the common ground of the Israelite history they share. With this shared foundation, Jesus engages her in a revealing conversation about water, himself, and the worship of God.

Jesus compares the water he offers her to springs of living water, like the kind found in rivers and sometimes used for baptism. Water is an important symbol for new life (or eternal life) in the Gospel of John. We've already seen John baptizing, Jesus turning water into the best wine, and Jesus encouraging his followers to be born of water and spirit in the Nicodemus dialogue. The woman asks for this water (and the new life?) but then the story takes a sharp turn: "Go, call your husband, and come back," Jesus says to her.

Why does Jesus seem to change the subject here? Well, it has to do with the well. In Genesis 29, Jacob meets his future wife, Rachel, at a well at midday. A generation before, Abraham's servant had found Isaac's wife, Rebekah, at a well (Gen 24). Biblical scholar Robert Alter labels repeated settings like these "biblical type-scenes" and he calls the meeting-at-a-well trope a betrothal type-scene. The first Christians to experience John's Gospel read aloud would have recognized this type-scene as soon as they heard that Jesus stopped at a well at noon.

And with Jesus's mention of husbands, John finally gives the audience what they've been expecting — a reference to marriage. What they did not expect, though, was that the woman in the scene was not a blushing bride-to-be but a wedding-weary woman. Preachers love to play up the scandal of the woman's multiple husbands, characterizing the Samaritan as a serial divorcee or an unfaithful tramp. But these interpretations stray from the actual text, injecting modern sensibilities (and misogynistic assumptions) into the story. Neither Jesus nor the Gospel writers make a value statement about the five husbands; it is likely the woman's past is not her fault. As a woman, she could not initiate divorce; she could have also been widowed and remarried multiple times.

So, if Jesus is not shaming the woman, why does he mention marriage? Many commentators interpret the woman's husbands symbolically, as representative of either the five political powers that had ruled Samaria or the five groups that were rumored to have comprised the early Samaritan people. In this view, Jesus is rehearsing Samaritan history. Perhaps this betrothal type–scene doesn't anticipate the marriage of a couple but of the Samaritans and their God (or the Samaritans and the Jews!). Jesus tells the woman that soon all people will worship not divided but together in Spirit and truth. Jesus then gives the Samaritan woman insight into the mysterious nature of God — God is Spirit — and invites her into the reality of this divine truth. . . .

The Samaritans, like the Jews, anticipated the arrival of an eschatological messianic figure, called the *Taheb*. The *Memar Marqah*, a Samaritan document from the third century BCE, says, "The *Taheb* will come and reveal the truth." It makes sense, then, that Jesus's disclosure of the Samaritan's truth prompted her hopeful comment about the Messiah. The climax would peak with Jesus's vulnerable line of self-disclosure: "I am (he) . . . the one speaking to you" (4:26).

This is the first "I am" statement in John . . . "I am the Messiah." This is the central truth of the Gospel of John (see 20:30-31) and it is the only time that Jesus reveals this truth to another person. That the person he trusts himself to is a Samaritan *and* a woman is deeply significant, not only to John's first-century audience but also to anyone who seeks to understand the Gospel. The truth of Jesus's life is that he brings a new way of life, a way that results in all people — women and men, Samaritans and Jews, religious outsiders and religious insiders — worshiping in Spirit and in truth.

At the scene's end, the woman runs off stage, eager to tell the people of her Samaritan village about Jesus, the Messiah and revealer of truth. While the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus concluded with the religious leader's confusion and indecision, the conversation at the well with the outsider woman results in her and her people becoming followers of Jesus. Her positive response to the truth Jesus shares becomes the model response to Jesus; she trusts Jesus and acts on that faith to become the first (and, arguably, the most effective) evangelist of John's Gospel.