

“The Savior of the World”

The Fourteenth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 4:27-42; Amos 9:11-15

Israel’s prophets foretold that in the messianic age, God would include countless Gentiles among those who would be the beneficiaries of the long expected deliverance from sin and the curse which the Messiah would accomplish. But by the time of Jesus, Jewish piety centered around things like ritual cleanliness and purity, observance of feast and Holy days, and a rigid external obedience to the law of Moses as interpreted by legal experts whom we know as scribes and teachers of the law. This kind of piety excluded any Gentile (unless they ceased being Gentiles and became Jews) and caused Jews to view Gentiles as “dogs” (unclean). But when Jesus leaves Jerusalem and passes through Samaria, we begin to see how poorly the Jews understood their own Scriptures. Israel’s prophets spoke of a great harvest which would include both Jew and Gentile. And in John 4, it becomes clear that Jesus has come to bring about that anticipated harvest.

In vv. 1-42 of John 4, we read of Jesus’ encounter with an unnamed woman at Jacob’s well in the heart of Samaria. Although the passage should be covered in one sermon, because of our limited time, I broke the passage up into two parts. Last time, we took up the first 26 verses of the chapter which recount Jesus’ dialogue with this Samaritan woman. In this sermon, I will briefly recount that conversation before we look at the consequences of that dialogue in vv. 27-42. Just as Israel’s prophets had foretold, many Gentiles came to believe that Jesus is the long-expected Messiah and Savior of the world even at this early phase of Jesus’ messianic mission. As we will see, when the gospel went out to the Samaritans, many (unlike the Jews) embraced it with great joy.

In the opening verses of chapter 4, John tells us that Jesus and his disciples were headed north back to Capernaum after leaving Jerusalem where Jesus had gone to celebrate the Passover. During his time in Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple calling it his father’s house. In righteous anger, Jesus cast out the merchants and money-changers who defiled the temple by selling their wares in the outer court of the Gentiles—that place where God intended the Gentile nations to come and worship the true and living God. This point is important to recall, because God’s intention to save Gentiles during the messianic age (extending the promise of salvation far beyond the narrow confines of Israel) will figure prominently in our passage.

Jesus performed a number of unspecified miracles during his time in Jerusalem. These miracles functioned to confirm that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and the son of God, leading a prominent member of the Sanhedrin (Nicodemus) who witnessed them, to acknowledge that Jesus’ miracles were an indication that God was with him. Yet, we have no clear indication that Nicodemus ever came to faith. Already worried about the multitudes following John the Baptist, it was during this time that Jesus came under the scrutiny of the Jewish religious leadership. Although John the Baptist’s wilderness ministry began to decrease in influence (just as prophesied), Jesus’ ministry was only now getting under way. Since it was not yet time for Jesus’ messianic mission to come to its fruition with his death and resurrection, Jesus sought to return to Capernaum in the region of Galilee (which served as the home base for Jesus during this early phase of his messianic ministry).

While passing through in the region of Samaria (the significance of which we discussed last time), John reports that Jesus became tired and thirsty, so he stopped at Jacob’s well near the village of Sychar to rest

and take water. His disciples had gone into town to purchase food. As Jesus sat near the well resting, about noon an unnamed woman approached the well to draw water. The woman had no idea who Jesus was (only that he was a Jew) and that she arrived at the well midday—presumably because she assumed that no one else from her village would be there. Unexpectedly, Jesus asks her for a drink. Jews and Samaritans intensely disliked one another, and avoided social contact with each other as much as possible. The Samaritan woman identified Jesus as a Jew and is taken aback when Jesus seemed indifferent to the long-standing historical and religious differences which divided their peoples. The woman knew that most Jews would have considered her water vessel (and the water in it) to be unclean because she was a Samaritan. Yet Jesus asks her for a drink.

In the dialogue which ensues (vv. 7-26), Jesus slowly reveals his identity to her. He tells her of a gift from God—implying that he is that gift from God, either in his incarnation, or in his ability to give the woman eternal life. Jesus speaks of this gift as “living water,” echoing a number of Old Testament texts wherein living water is used as a metaphor for the salvation and blessing of the messianic age (just as feasting and fine wine). Since the woman is a Samaritan (and since the Samaritans rejected the Old Testament historical books and prophets, accepting only the Pentateuch), she is probably not familiar with the biblical images to which Jesus is alluding. So she takes his words about the living water literally. She replies to him, “*sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water*” (v. 15). She does not understand that Jesus is speaking to her true need—her need for the forgiveness of her sins and her need for the gift of eternal life. Missing the Old Testament symbolism taken from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the woman is only thinking in terms of being relieved from the difficult burden of hauling water in the midday heat.

Realizing that she does not understand the living water metaphor, Jesus asks the woman to go and get her husband. When she tells him that she has no husband, Jesus reveals that he knows all about her past. He tells her that she is currently living with a man to whom she is not married, and that she has had five husbands previously. It is implied that because of her marital status and personal history this woman is a social outcast among her people (the inhabitants of Sychar) and went to the well at noon alone. It is likely that the women from the village would have come to the well in a group to get water at first light. She does not join them. Jesus does not ask about her husband to shame her, but to reveal to her that he is Israel’s Messiah who knows all about her past, her ethnicity, and outcast status, yet still asks her for water. The woman is slowly realizing that Jesus is at the very least “a” prophet—or even perhaps “the” prophet who had been foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15.

We are not sure if the woman is being contentious or making small talk with Jesus (and pointing out the obvious), when in verse 20 she states “*our fathers [the Samaritans] worshiped on this mountain [Mount Gerazim], but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.*” Jesus’ next answer to her confirms that at the very least he is the prophet and much, much, more. As we read in verse 21, “*Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.’*” Because the Samaritans reject much of the Old Testament (including the historical books) the Samaritans did not have the benefit of God’s revelation to David that the temple was to be built in Jerusalem on Mount Zion, not in Samaria on Mount Gerazim. Therefore, Jesus says, the Samaritans “do not know” these things.

Furthermore, Jesus tells her that “*salvation is from the Jews,*” because the Messiah will come through David’s line (i.e., through the Jewish people) and not through the Samaritans. The Samaritan woman is not completely sure who Jesus is, but she is beginning to figure it out as Jesus reveals more and more to

her. Says Jesus *“but the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”* When Jesus speaks of the coming hour, he is foretelling that his own death upon the cross as the final payment for sin will be the means by which God renders the temple in Jerusalem obsolete. When his hour comes and his messianic mission will culminate in his death and resurrection, it will not matter where God’s people worship (in a temple in Jerusalem or on a mountain in Gerazim). What will matter when the hour comes—as it already has because Jesus has come—is who God’s people worship (the triune God as he is revealed in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit), and how (in truth—as he has revealed himself in his word), not where (on a particular mountain—either in Jerusalem or Gerazim).

When Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that God is Spirit, he does so to explain why religious geography (sacred mountains and holy buildings) belongs to the era of the old covenant and not the new. Because God is spirit he is invisible, eternal, omniscient, and omnipresent. He is the creator of all things and is not bound by time as space as humans are. Unless and until God reveals himself to us we cannot know anything about him. We are sinful and finite. God is holy and infinite. This is why Jesus places such emphasis upon worshiping God *“in spirit and in truth,”*—worshiping God as he reveals himself to us through his word (the so-called regulative principle), not as we think fit based on our sinful desires, or our personal preferences, or our fear of not being hip.

The woman’s final response indicates that she is beginning to understand, but is not yet at the point of trusting in Jesus. In verse 25, we read, *“the woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.’”* Jesus has told her of heavenly things: the gift of eternal life, that he can give her living water which can take away all human thirst, and that because God is spirit, he is not bound to specific places or buildings. This is why Jesus shows no concern for the long-standing division between Jew and Samaritan over where the temple should stand. Jesus has also told her of earthly things—he had just met her and yet he can recount her entire marital history. So Jesus responds directly to her comment about the coming Messiah in verse 26. *“Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he.’”*

As I pointed out last time, this declaration is very important in terms of the purpose of Jesus’ messianic mission because Jesus has revealed himself to a Samaritan (regarded by Jews as a heretical half-bred and ceremonially unclean), and to a woman with a past who was likely an outcast among her own people. Jews did not talk to Samaritans. Men did not talk to any woman like this in public—much less one with a past. Since Jesus was Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God, you would expect that he would reveal himself to someone like Herod (and the ruling family of Israel), or to the Jewish high priest, or even to the members of the Sanhedrin. Knowing that his own people (the Jews) will not receive him, instead, Jesus reveals himself to the least likely of people in the most out of the way places—an outcast woman at Jacob’s well in the middle of Samaria. The result of this encounter is that Samaritan heretics and unclean half-breeds will gladly embrace Israel’s Messiah through faith even as the Jews reject him.

This is why what follows in verses 27-42 is so utterly remarkable, and why Jesus’ disciples are so shocked when they return to where they left Jesus to buy food, only to find him engaging with this least likely of people and with complete disregard for societal convention. As we turn to part two of our look at this passage we pick up then with verse 27. *“Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you seek?’ or, ‘Why are you talking with her?’”* Jews did not talk with Samaritans, men did not speak to women, and it was common for rabbis to contend that they avoided any conversation with women (even their wives) because such conversation was

considered a waste of time, detracting from the Rabbi's time of reflection on the Torah (law). It is important to notice that Jesus ignores the sinful prejudices of his day—throughout the gospels Jesus repeatedly speaks with women.¹ Whatever their level of surprise (which must have been considerable), the disciples say nothing to either Jesus or the woman.

Seeing a group of men coming to Jesus, the woman flees the scene so to speak. *“So the woman left her water jar and went away into town.”* We do not know if the woman was excited about what Jesus told her, afraid of a group of men in an area known to be thick with robbers, or if she was merely leaving her water jar behind as a courtesy. But we do know that she tells everyone in Sychar (her village) about the man whom she had just met who told her about her past. Apparently, she created quite a commotion in the village. She *“said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?’”* Her astonishment is obvious to those who saw and heard her.

Jesus' revelation to her about her past, his comments about the coming hour, as well as his explanation why religious places no longer mattered, prompt the woman to move beyond the thought that Jesus was a prophet. Jesus told her plainly that he was the Messiah. Could it really be? Why would the Messiah come to Jacob's well? Why would he speak to her, an outcast from her own village? But this man knew all about her. Her townspeople either cannot believe her without confirmation, or they are convinced that something important is up based upon her level of excitement. They want to see this mysterious stranger for themselves. We read in verse 30, *“they went out of the town and were coming to him.”*

Before the people from Sychar arrive at the place where Jesus had been resting, the scene shifts in verse 31 to a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. They have just returned with the food they purchased in a nearby town. They expect to find Jesus weary and hungry and ready to eat. But instead Jesus uses this moment to teach them something new about the nature and character of his mission which would be entering a new and more intense phase—characterized by increasing conflict with the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin. In verses 31-33 we read of the following exchange in which the disciples show they too are confused about the nature of Jesus' mission. *“Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, ‘Rabbi, eat.’ But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’”*

The disciples do not understand what Jesus means by his answer. *“So the disciples said to one another, ‘Has anyone brought him something to eat?’”* What is this other food Jesus is talking about? Who brought Jesus lunch? Did the woman give him something to eat? The irony is that just as the Samaritan woman had taken Jesus literally when he spoke of living water, so now the disciples take him literally when he speaks of a kind of food which the disciples do not know about.² Their collective lack of understanding becomes an important opportunity for Jesus to explain to them more fully about the nature of who he is, and the purpose of his messianic mission.

According to verse 34, *“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.’”* His words clearly echo Deuteronomy 8:3 when Moses explained God's purposes to the people of Israel. *“And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”* This is a passage which Jesus also

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 227.

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 228.

cites when tempted by the devil while in the wilderness (Matthew 4:4). Jesus tells the disciples that he came to do God's will and accomplish all that the Father had given him to do. This is his purpose and his obedience to the will of God will define his mission. In fact, it is his obedience to the word of God in fulfilling his mission which sustains him. Of course, as fully human, Jesus needs food and nourishment. But his goal—which drives everything he does—is to obey God's will. This is a major theme in this gospel to which John will return again in John 5:19-47.

It is from passages such as this one that Reformed theologians develop that which we call Jesus' "active obedience." Jesus begins to point the disciples ahead to the cross—the ultimate work of obedience he must accomplish—because his death upon the cross is absolutely essential if we are to be saved from the wrath of God and rescued from the guilt and power of sin. So too, we cannot be saved if Jesus does not obey God's will perfectly—in his thinking, doing, and speech. Jesus must fulfill all righteousness through his own personal obedience to God's law (i.e., his "active obedience") so that his righteousness (his perfect obedience) can be imputed to us through the means of faith. Jesus' obedience to the will of God is the foundation for the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. Through faith in Jesus Christ, his obedience to the will of God becomes ours.

Even though Jesus is hungry and bread may stop his hunger pangs and give him physical strength, it is his obedience to the Father's will which truly fulfills and satisfies his own spiritual hunger. This is why Jesus spoke to the woman at the well. The gospel must go to the Gentiles (even the Samaritans!) and sinners (like the outcast woman at the well) must repent and come to embrace Jesus through faith. That Jesus does this fulfills the will of God, and points to the tragic fact that his own people (the Jews) will openly reject him as his messianic mission progresses, and he becomes more and more of a public figure.

Jesus continues to use this opportunity to instruct his disciples. He has much to teach them. In verse 35, he asks them "*do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.*" Using an agricultural metaphor (as he often does), Jesus reminds them that when you sow seed, four months later the seeds have germinated and are ready to be harvested. There is normally an interval of time between the sowing of seed and the harvest. But Jesus has just sown seed among the Samaritans and the crop is already white and ready for harvest. The harvest has already begun (even though seed has just been sown) because Jesus is doing the work his Father sent him to do. The disciples will soon see the incredible result of his revelation of his messianic identity to the Samaritan woman.

Jesus goes on in verse 36 to make yet another point regarding the harvest. "*Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.*" Again, Jesus' words echo messianic prophecy, this time the promise of a successful harvest in Amos 9:11-15, (our Old Testament lesson) in which both sower and reaper prosper because of the greatness of the harvest which includes both renewal of Israel and the conversion of Gentiles. "*In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,*" declares the Lord who does this. *'Behold, the days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,' says the Lord your God.*"

Jesus is already giving eternal life to those given him by the Father, those who respond to his preaching and miracles with faith—trusting that he is truly Israel’s Messiah and that one in whom there is eternal life and the forgiveness of sin. In his own sowing and reaping, Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy of Amos 9. In this case (the harvest has already come in), and the one who sowed the seed will actually see the harvest take place. Therefore, both the sower and reaper will enjoy the blessings of a full harvest. In other words, Jesus is telling them that the long expected messianic age has finally dawned, and that God will now begin saving his people through faith in Christ—whether they be Jew, Samaritan, or Gentile.

Jesus now informs them that there is a division of labor of sorts in the messianic age. *“For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”* There are those who sow and there are those who reap. Both are necessary if there is to be a successful harvest. The sower plants in anticipation of what will come, while the reaper has a crop to harvest only because the sower has done the hard work of planting that which seems to have no life (a seed) and does not produce a crop until long after the sower has done his work.

The point Jesus is making is that the disciples will be reaping the benefits of work done previously by others. John the Baptist has been in the same area, and there can be no doubt that Jesus has him in mind. But in addition to John the Baptist, Israel’s prophets have also sown the seed of that harvest which the disciples are about to witness with their own eyes. This urgency of harvest time is the reason why Jesus has called them to follow him—they are to harvest that crop originally sown by those who brought the word of God long before. They cannot yet even begin to envision the church which Jesus will create, and the role they will play in taking the gospel to ends of the earth, as they both sow and reap!

The account of the Samaritan woman ends with John’s report about the tremendous effects of the woman’s testimony upon the inhabitants of Sychar. As we read in verse 39, *“many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me all that I ever did.’”* The contrast between the heretical and unclean Samaritans response to Jesus and the response of Jesus’ own people (the Jews) could not be greater. Upon hearing the testimony of a female outcast from their own society, many of the Samaritans were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah (a man whom they had not yet even seen in person) and they believed in him. Yes, indeed, the harvest was already coming in.

When the Samaritans did find Jesus at Jacob’s well (remember, to them, Jesus would have been seen as a Jewish Rabbi who would have normally avoided all contact with them) they welcomed him—despite the longstanding racial animosities. By revealing that he is the Messiah to an unnamed woman, Jesus has undone four centuries of conflict between Jew and Samaritan. More importantly, he has sown the seed of the Word (the revelation of his messianic identity) which immediately produces a harvest. As we come to the end of this section (vv. 40-42), John informs us of the wonderful outcome. *“When the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.”* These two days spent among them gives Jesus the opportunity to teach and preach in much more detail than would have been possible had he left the area. As a consequence of this, we read *“and many more believed because of his word.”* The woman’s testimony has been confirmed. The rest of her people have seen with their own eyes and *“they said to the woman, ‘it is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.’”*

The irony here is powerful. The Pharisees are worried about Jesus’ increasing popularity and will soon engage him in a series of contentious encounters, even accusing Jesus of being a “Samaritan” and demon possessed. But the Samaritans, on the other hand, accept Jesus’ word, invite him to stay with them, they

listen to his teaching and preaching, and many become convinced that Jesus is the Savior of the World (not that Jesus intends to save the whole world, but that in all the world, Jesus is the only Savior of sinners). It is the Samaritans who gladly receive the gift of living water which Jesus now offers them—not Israel. Many are given eternal life, come to trust in him, and receive the forgiveness of sins and a perfect righteous. They will never thirst again because Jesus is the Savior of the world. May we beloved, through faith, embrace this Savior as well.