

**“REBEKAH’S STORY”**  
*John 4:4-30*

She could only go at certain times – when there was no-one else around. There had been a time when she’d just tried to brazen it out, walk along with the rest of them, her head held high, her heart full of a kind of defiant pride. Why not, after all? It wasn’t her fault: it was only the wagging tongues of others, the vivid imaginations of the villagers who saw her as the villain of the piece. But it had become clear that no-one wanted to talk **to** her – they wanted only to talk **about** her; in their little self-righteous huddles, the outrage boiling off them like steam, then their voices tailing away into whispers as she approached them. They always made sure that there was no room for her at the lip of the well until they’d all finished.

She tried going along with the rest of them, tried ignoring it all, but in the end she’d given up making the effort and now she went only when she knew no-one else would be there. That meant at about noon-time, when it was almost too hot to move outside the shade of the buildings and the olive trees, when all the others were in the cool dark of their homes, sharing their midday food with husbands back from the fields.

Her man had come in too, but he knew he’d have to wait until she’d fetched the water before they could eat together. He’d turned up in the village a few weeks before, and it didn’t take long for him to move in with Rebekah. Apparently – so the word was at the well – he had a wife up in Nain, but he never mentioned her, naturally, and Rebekah was glad of any company.

She’d been married too, of course. The first time it was wonderful – a handsome, clever young man who offered her a great future. Their families had been delighted with the match and they loved each other deeply. Each day brought new delights and new adventure in their life together. But then he’d died suddenly one autumn evening – choked on a fish bone as they ate together in the waning light, and by the time help arrived his breath had gone for ever.

Rebekah was distraught. Her life seemed ruined. In the depths of her grief – and without really knowing what she was doing – she’d taken up with Nathan – “God’s gift”, the name meant, and she saw him as God’s gift to her at a difficult time. She married again – with unseemly haste according to the women at the well. There was a slight chill in the reception she got when she went for water.

Nathan was a strange one, though. He soon tired of his wife’s company and he’d go off in the evenings to spend time with the dice-throwers and wine-bibbers at the other end of the village. She never really

knew what they got up to over there and she'd spend her evenings thinking of how wonderful it was the first time round. One night, Nathan did not come home and two days later they found what was left of him in a ditch. No-one ever found out how he'd got there, but that didn't stop the women at the well speculating.

Rebekah went off to stay with some relatives in Samaria, but soon found that living cramped up with your cousins, uncles and nephews in a couple of small houses was not ideal. Simeon particularly couldn't keep his eyes off her, then his hands, and then, well ... despite her protestations, by spring she was pregnant. They were married as soon as it was discovered, but she miscarried and Simeon was no longer interested. Her family seemed to turn against her and she was made to feel even more unwelcome. Back to Sychar.

Word had travelled ahead of her. The women at the well put their own gloss on it – she'd lost three husbands and a baby: God must be punishing her for something, and they had no wish to be tainted by her presence. Her still young face seemed much older now. The lines of grief and shame and anxiety criss-crossed it and rarely folded into anything other than a frown. She kept herself very much to herself, until one day Gideon turned up. He was around her age and had also lost a partner. He'd been married some years before, but his wife had died in childbirth, along with the child. Now he travelled around from village to village, doing odd jobs and trying to make a living. Their common sense of sadness initially made them natural companions but for a few months they re-discovered happiness in each other's company. Not long after their marriage, Gideon lost the fingers of his right hand in an accident involving a cart wheel he was repairing. He was now unable to work at all and depression set in. Despite the encouragements of his wife, he felt humiliated that he couldn't provide for Rebekah and one afternoon she came back from the market to discover Gideon hanging from a rafter. For the next few days you couldn't get near the well for gaggles of gossiping women – who'd all, of course, seen it coming; “Well, what do you expect – a woman with her past!”

“Her past”, of course, was mostly in their imagination. She'd tried to do what was best. She'd needed to provide for herself. And she'd broken no law, breached no etiquette – other than not behaving as they did. But they were lucky – they still had their husbands, their families, their ordinary lives. She'd lost everything – not once, but several times.

And then she met Cassius: a Roman soldier not far off demob, but still, strangely, a bachelor. She met him by chance one day in the market and a conversation started up. They began to order their movements so that their paths crossed and soon they were seeing each other almost every day. It was a difficult relationship to sustain, and the attitude of the women at the well didn't help, but they really felt they

loved each other – and Cassius even gave up the final opportunity of a commission so that he could stay and marry her.

He used his bonus to buy a small parcel of land and when his colleagues went home he stayed in Sychar. But after a while he missed them – a lone foreigner in an alien village, and, of course, there was the barely suppressed resentment of the villagers over whom he had once held some kind of authority. His sense of loneliness and frustration became increasingly hard to deal with and in the end he started knocking Rebekah about when she didn't do exactly as he wanted. She avoided the others, but her bruises were the talk of the women at the well: "Well, she must've been asking for it."

In the end, she left him. It was really the only course of action open to her. She didn't want to – it wasn't right, and it left her on her own again. But she walked out and stayed with the only friend she had left, a woman who lived at the foot of Mount Gerizim. After a bit she heard that Cassius had disappeared – gone back to Gaul or somewhere, so the women at the well murmured to each other – and she came back to Sychar again. Soon the current man appeared: Amos. Rebekah had no-one who really cared. Amos certainly didn't care – all he wanted was his meals on time and a quick grope before his noisy and foetid sleep each night – but it was a fairly convenient arrangement: she got a bit of security and the basic necessities, and he got a relatively compliant bedfellow. It was the last straw for the women at the well, though.

So the day the Jew turned up was a day that burned in her memory as bright as the noon-day sun. There he was, sitting on the lip of the well, watching her intently as she approached. Just another selfish man wanting to take advantage of her, to add to the mess that was her life. A Jew who came up here where no-one knew him in order to get his illicit kicks.

"Any chance of a drink?" he said, shielding his eyes from the sun with a carpenter's calloused hand as he stared at her water jar.

"But you're a Jew," she replied, as chastely as she could. "I can tell by your accent and the shape of your face. I'm a Samaritan – and a woman at that. What's your game?" ("What's *my* game?" she thought. "Out here alone by the well at noon.")

"You don't know me ..." He paused. "And you don't know real love, do you? Real, living, comforting love – love as true, as cool, as refreshing, as boundless as the water down there." He looked away from her and down the well.

“I need that,” she said. “I need someone to care, to love, to be real.” Her voice quavered and her burning eyes swam with tears. “If you could show me that ...”

He spoke to her, this gentle Jewish carpenter. He spoke about her; he seemed to understand all that she'd been through, the rough times she'd lived, the stuff she'd had to put up with from men, from family, from neighbours, from erstwhile friends. He understood her suspicion and cynicism and knew that her five husbands and her present desperate search for someone who could really love her were not her fault. He didn't condemn her, but talked of love and life – and it sounded like the things she'd heard about the Jewish Messiah, the one whom even her ancestors had longed for – God's love wrapped up in human flesh.

He stared into her thoughts. “That's me,” he said softly, after while. “That's me,” he repeated more firmly, “the one you're talking to. That's me – the one you're waiting for.” And Rebekah rushed away to tell the village, head held high, heart full – full of happiness and healing and hope.

“That's me,” says Jesus. “That's me – the one you're waiting for.”

Maybe you are waiting for Jesus this morning. You may not know it. You may be acutely aware of it. But you are waiting. Some of you here are like that woman at the well. Life is not going well for you at the moment. You've known good times, but it seems that you've known a heck of a lot more bad. And really, it's not all your fault. You've been left with impossible options and you've tried to choose the least bad. Circumstances have conspired against you. Things have gone wrong. Other people have misunderstood, misinterpreted you. They've seen what they've wanted to see – just as we so often do when we read this story: it doesn't say anywhere that she was immoral, that Jesus was rebuking her, does it? And you've come out of it badly. You've lost your faith in other people – even people whom once you counted as your friends, even people who called themselves Christians. You've lost any faith you might once have had in God.

But here you are today – somehow you've ended up here where Jesus is. He's here, by his Spirit, looking into your mind, into your soul, just as he did to the woman at the well. He knows what you want, what you need. He can see that you are waiting for him. Remember – if you remember nothing else about this morning – that you matter to him. You may feel that you matter to no-one else, but you matter to him. In fact, you matter so much to him that he was prepared to die for you. Jesus died – nailed naked and spread-eagled to a rough wooden cross – so that he could deal with the things that are causing you grief, so that you could somehow escape the dreadful consequences of your own wrong decisions and choices.

To you, Jesus says, “It’s me – the one you’re waiting for.” And you can acknowledge that and receive what he has to offer you this morning, if you want to.

But some of you know all about Jesus already. You’ve had your heads stuffed full of theology and doctrine for years, decades, here and elsewhere. You know who he is and what he’s about. Like the woman at the well, you’ve heard about the Messiah, the Christ. You’ve learned to do the things that are expected of you in worship and in the life of the church and the community. But you’ve never really encountered him in a way that could transform your life. Or maybe you have, but it just seems so long ago now and life’s gone back to being a bit of a bore. The spark has gone. The flame has dimmed. Somehow, Jesus seems to have lost interest in you – or perhaps you’ve lost interest in him.

He’s here today. He’s here, by his Spirit, looking into your mind, into your soul, just as he did to the woman at the well. He knows what you want, what you need. He can see that you are waiting for him. He can see that, deep down, you are wanting to worship him. He invites you to worship “*in spirit and in truth*”. Oh, you can do the *truth* bit. You’re a great stickler for the truth. You’ve read the books and heard the lectures and taken notes in the sermons. You’ve argued with the heretics and dotted your dogmatic I’s. But you need Jesus to touch your spirit again, to let you know that he cares about you. Really, you’re longing for him to fill you up again with his Spirit, to give you the sense of happiness and hope and healing that the woman at the well experienced.

“It’s me,” he says to you. “The one you’re waiting for.” He’s here this morning inviting you to open yourself up to him again, to receive all that he wants to give you – that living water that will flow through your being and refresh your soul, because (let’s face it) it’s all got a bit stagnant in there recently.

And there’s nothing quite as good for drawing people towards Jesus as lives that have been changed, lives that have been filled with the sparkling water of life, lives that are soaked in the Spirit of God, lives of people who know that they matter to God. Whoever you are, why ever you’re here today, whatever your ideas of Jesus when you came in here – he’s extending to you the same invitation that he extended to that lonely woman at the well of Sychar two millennia ago, the same invitation that he has been extending to people ever since: the living water of his Holy Spirit. Reach out and take it this morning.