The Southern Kingdom managed to fend off the Assyrians, but failed to rescue their northern kin, planting seeds of resentment that festered for centuries.

A few generations later, the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians, and then the Judeans, carting their leaders off to exile in Babylon. This Babylonian captivity lasted only a few generations, for when Persian King Cyrus swept in and defeated the Babylonians, he allowed the exiles in Babylon to return home. They returned to a ruined nation, but their new king, Ezra, set out to rebuild the temple and restore Judah’s ancient worship practices.

The religion of the Samaritans evolved in a different direction. The temple in Jerusalem (rebuilt or not) held no attraction for them. They worshiped God atop Mount Gerizim. The Samaritan woman refers to this when she says to Jesus: “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem” (4:20). She is emphasizing just one of the many differences between them.

Back to the painting: Jesus and the woman communicate, just not face-to-face. It is an awkward encounter because of the cultural disparity between them. There is an expression of warm interest on the woman’s face, but Jesus seems aloof. Jesus speaks first, asking for a drink, but then it is the woman who takes the initiative.

This is very different from the encounter Jesus had with the Pharisee Nicodemus (John 3), the man to whom Jesus famously says, “You must be born from above” (or “born again”). That story is pretty much a one-sided exchange: Nicodemus seeks Jesus out, asks him a question or two, then Jesus does most of the talking. John’s placement of the two stories, one right after the other, is deliberate. He wants us to hold one up against the other, to compare them. On the one hand, Jesus encounters a learned leader of the Jewish people. On the other hand, Jesus encounters a foreign woman, a person he is taught to avoid.

The exchange between the Samaritan woman and Jesus is entirely different from the way he talks to the Pharisee. There is a real give-and-take between them: a fully developed conversation rather than a one-sided lecture. It speaks of the high regard Jesus has for this woman. He is more than happy to give her the time of day, even though tradition dictated that they should avoid each other. You see the cultural bias when John tells us how Jesus’ disciples were “astonished that he was speaking with a woman” (4:27).

What’s more, she is often portrayed as a woman of low virtue, based on Jesus’ comment: “…you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband” (4:18). Some preachers, noting this detail about her non-traditional living arrangement, conclude that she is fetching water in the heat of the day (when few others are around) because she is a social outcast, shunned by her own people. There is no factual basis for any of this, though; in fact, at the end of the story, the woman has plenty of friends to whom she can run and offer her testimony. It does not seem like she is living in shame, as some conclude.

Malczewski’s painting reflects no such illusion. Just look at the way he uses light! The whole scene is bathed in golden sunlight. This woman is curious about Jesus and seems more than able to engage him in a theological discussion in the full light of the sun. Jesus credits her as an honest spiritual inquirer. He spends a lot more time (in terms of verses) talking with the Samaritan woman than he does with his night-time visitor, Nicodemus.

The themes of light and darkness are essential to John. Throughout his gospel he portrays Jesus as light pushing back darkness. Pharisees like Nicodemus are in darkness and must come into the light. This Samaritan woman, smiling at Jesus in the golden light of midday, is already a person who knows something of the light of God. Jesus gives her credits for that. There is a warmth and a brightness about this painting that shows how any truth-seeker who honestly and openly comes to Jesus will receive the light he offers. If you look at Jesus’ left hand, you will see his fingers forming the traditional gesture of blessing, as though he is about to turn around and offer her a benediction.

Once the woman realizes who Jesus is, she leaves her water jar beside the well and goes to tell her neighbors: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (4:29). This woman’s witness to Jesus is far more certain, far bolder than anything Nicodemus says. The fact that she leaves her water jar behind is a powerful symbol, for those who leave the tools of their trade to go and preach the Gospel are apostles: Peter, James and John leave their nets, Matthew abandons his tax records, Paul no longer wears the distinctive hat and robe of the Pharisee. This Samaritan woman is an apostle, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah long before any of his other disciples do.

Our second visual piece is **“The Water of Life,”** by Stephen Broadbent (1994), a sculpture that stands in the courtyard of the cloister at Chester Cathedral (England). The fountain is situated atop an ancient well. Carved around the bottom are these words: “Jesus said ‘the water that I shall give will be an inner spring always welling up for eternal life’” (4:14). In exchange for a drink of water, Jesus promises the Samaritan woman “living water.” It is the prospect of living water that draws her in, questioning Jesus further: “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water” (4:15).

Think of how hard this woman’s life was. She has had five different husbands: we do not know if she was widowed or if the men divorced her. Maybe both of those things happened to her, with different husbands. Far from being a disreputable person, this woman is strong, a survivor. She thrives in a culture designed to keep her down. If the man she now lives with is not her husband, Jesus does not seem to judge her for that. He is far more interested in healing her pain. He trusts that she will repent and do the right thing if she can get her heart right and profess him as Lord.

You see that in this sculpture. The two look directly at each other. The posture of their bodies is equal: she is higher than Jesus, but he supports her in the role of teacher and Savior. Between them is a bowl of water, from which gushes a constant stream. Both hold the bowl. Is she offering him a drink of water from the well, or is he offering her the gift of living water? Impossible to say! Which is true-to-life, because we promise to serve Jesus as disciples, and he offers us living water in return. Or is it the other way around? Maybe he offers us living water first, and we serve him in gratitude. There is a constant give-and-take, a flow, between disciple and master, between each of us and the God we serve.

The entire sculpture is a circle, depicting a dynamic exchange, a holy giving and receiving that goes on forever. In the Celtic tradition, the circle is a symbol of eternity. When we enter a relationship with Jesus Christ, we do so for eternity. It is that “spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Visual art offers us so many perspectives, and each time we come back to it we discover something new. The same is true of our relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. Living water flows at the heart of that relationship: refreshing, restoring, and reviving. If you feel that your spiritual life is a little dry, Jesus’ invitation to the Samaritan woman if an invitation for you, as well. Jesus welcomes the thirsty who seek the living water only he can give. Offer him, in your outstretched hands, the bowl of your servant heart. He will supply you, in exchange, with an endless supply of living water!

Prayer: Life-Giving God, we confess that too often we drink from things other than You and miss out on Your living water which wells up to eternal life. We come today thirsty for You and for the living water only You can provide. Help us to set aside the things that do not give life, and do not satisfy our souls. Open and prepare our hearts to encounter You. We pray as disciples of Jesus, Our Living Lord. Amen.

**Sources:**

* “Christ and the Samaritan Woman,” oil on canvas painting, Jacek Malczewski (1909).

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Malczewski_Christ_and_the_Samaritan_woman.jpg>

* “The Water of Life,” bronze sculpture, Stephen Broadbent (1994).

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22The_Water_of_Life%22_sculpture_in_Chester_Cathedral_cloister_garth_(13).jpg>

**The Other Samaritan**

Sunday, March 12, 2023 [John 4:5-42](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+4%3a5-42&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The old maxim says, “Seeing is believing.” If that is true, then we are at a disadvantage when it comes to meeting Jesus in the Scriptures. We can use our ears to hear stories of his life. We can engage our imaginations to picture the scenes. But visual learning can also help us connect with the story. So, we are going to enlist a couple of artists to help us explore the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. Neither one of these artworks is completely realistic. The artists use their interpretative gifts to approach the story from a surprising, and even startling, angle.

**“Christ and the Samaritan Woman”** is by modern Polish artist, Jacek Malczewski (YAHT-sek mal-CHEV-ski), one of several he did, based on this story. The painting is anachronistic: the two figures look like early 20th-century Polish people, and the face of Jesus is a self-portrait of the artist. (Malczewski was fond of painting himself into his pictures!) Here he wears an artist’s smock and carries an umbrella and straw hat. As for the Samaritan woman, she looks like a Polish peasant, dressed to go, and draw water at the well.

What I find unusual about those two figures, is that Jesus is facing away from the woman. She appears to be taking the initiative in talking with him, and he appears to be listening, but they do not make eye contact. This reflects an important detail of the story. Culturally speaking, these two people would be unlikely to interact. This is reflected when Jesus asked the woman to give him a drink of water, and she responded with astonishment: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (4:9a).

John provides a helpful little footnote that explains: “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans” (4:9b). This is a bit of biblical understatement, as Jews and Samaritans did not like each other at all. The two nations worshiped the same God, but apart from that, they were from two completely different tribes. Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan exhibits the same historic hatred between the Jews and the Samaritan peoples.

The Samaritans are the remnant of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel. After the death of King Solomon, the nation split into two, under different kings. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) had its capital in Samaria. The Southern Kingdom (Judah) had its capital in Jerusalem. A few generations later, the Assyrians invaded and destroyed the Northern Kingdom, sacking its principal cities, and hauling its leaders off into exile. They set up a puppet kingdom and made the people pay a heavy tribute,