The story of the woman at the well and her encounter with Christ appears only in the Gospel of John. But it gives a very dramatic and vivid picture of Jesus. John had introduced his gospel about the Son of God, not with any manger scene of a baby born of Mary and Joseph, but with the dramatic announcement that in the beginning was the Word, the pattern of God’s order and purpose which existed before Creation, was made flesh in Christ and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. No gospel gives a more awesome picture of Christ’s divine descent - his authority and power. And yet we find Him in this story fully human, resting by a well at about the sixth hour, noon-time, tired and hot and thirsty, asking for a drink from a woman who had come to the well to draw water for herself.

The background of the story is important. Palestine, was, is, a small country, we forget this when we consider the great tradition of religious history that has come out of it - the nation of Israel today. Palestine is only about 120 miles long from north to south, and in Jesus’ day, it was like Caesar’s Gaul, divided into three parts - in the north was Galilee; in the south was Judea. And in between lay Samaria. But there was a centuries old feud between the Jews and Samaritans. John suggests that Jesus didn’t want to get into a controversy about baptism in the area where John the Baptist had been at work in Judea, and so he left to work in Galilee.

The direct route took Him through Samaria; to avoid it by crossing the Jordan would take twice as long, about a week. So Jesus went into Samaria and near the town of Sychar He came to a fork in the road where still today there is a deep well known as Jacob’s well. Many Jewish memories were centered here. According to Genesis, Jacob bought a parcel of land here, and the same authority says Jacob on his deathbed gave the land to Joseph. Joshua reports that when Joseph died in Egypt, his body was brought back and buried here. Interestingly enough, there is no mention of Jacob’s well anywhere in the Old Testament. But the existence of the ancient deep well was well known.

At any rate, Jesus is resting by the well, according to the story. His disciples had gone into town to buy food. And when the Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus asked her for a drink. She turned, astonished, and said, “I am a Samaritan. You are a Jew. How is it that you ask br a drink from me?” And the scripture explains that Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Or as the New English Bible puts it, Jews and Samaritans don’t use vessels in common. Clearly they aren’t on terms of friendly familiarity. Now why?

The feud had a long history. Way back in about 720 B.C., the Assyrians in conquering Israel captured the northern part of Samaria. They transported most of the population to Media and brought in other peoples from Babylon and other places. What happened eventually was that
those who were left in Samaria intermarried with the new foreign populations and lost their purity. Most of those taken away as captives never came back. They were assimilated in foreign lands. They are the lost tribes of Israel. Those who were left intermarried with the incoming foreigners and so lost their right to be called Jews at all.

At least, this is what the Jews of the southern kingdom thought, whose capital was Jerusalem. And when they suffered a similar fate and lost out in the political squeeze of trying to play politics with Egypt against Babylon - when they were overwhelmed by Babylon, their temple destroyed, and were transported to Babylon themselves, somehow they kept their identity and remained stubbornly Jewish. The situation may have been different. Babylonians may have respected their ethnic and religious uniqueness more than the Assyrians earlier. They seem to have been kept separate as an ethnic curiosity. There is that deeply moving 137th Psalm that describes the situation.

_But the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps on the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that captured us required of us mirth saying Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?_

How poignant this is. But then there follows the steel-hard vow: “If I forget you, 0 Jerusalem, let my right hand wither away, if I do not remember you.” And the bitter memory of Jerusalem’s fall when the enemy shouted, “Down with it, down with it to the very foundations”. And the bitter wish for vengeance, “0 Babylon, the destroyer; happy the man who repays you for all you did to us. Happy is he who shall take your little ones and dash them against the stones.”

Well, the Babylonians soon fell to the Medes, the Persians and Cyrus the king liberated the Jews and sent them back to Judea where, under Ezra and Nehemiah, the city and temple were rebuilt. The Samaritans came to help but were told no thank you - this was a sacred task for Jews - Samaritans had lost their right to share in the rebuilding of the house of God. Repulsed, the Samaritans bitterly turned to their own ways. This was about 450 B.C., but the quarrel continued to Jesus’ days. Samaritans built their own rival temple on Mt. Gerizim which was sacked later by a Jewish general in the Maccabean days. So an embittered hatred flourished. No wonder the Samaritan woman was astonished that Jesus, a Jew, would speak to her, a Samaritan.

There is much that is astonishing in the story. Here is Christ, the Son of God, the Word Incarnate, stopping by a well because he was weary, hot and thirsty. The Gospel writer who stresses most the divine nature of Jesus also shows His humanity to the full. And no matter how familiar we are with our religious tradition, it seems sometimes difficult to think of the cosmic, creative powers we associate with God in the form of a person, somehow vulnerable to the same weariness and difficulties that plague us. Perhaps it is easier to think of impersonal powers, as the cosmic order of nature and the laws of energy than the creative love which finds its home and center of activity in the vulnerable nature of man.

I think sometimes it is hardest of all for those of us in the liberal tradition. The personal gracious calling of our Lord in the form of one like us, yet not like us, is hard to connect with the cosmic
forces of the universe we associate with the order of God. Yet this is precisely the image we have of God in Christ in the Gospel of John. He breaks through the barrier of the impersonal logos, to sit at the well curb even as you and I, ready to meet the friend or the stranger on their terms. The revelation of the light shines through the creative love that everyone who knew Jesus sensed in His person. So God breaks through the barrier of cosmic power to reveal Himself in the spirit of Love.

And the next astonishing thing to note is how this Samaritan woman responds to this spirit. There must have been a long conversation. Afterwards, the woman reported in the city, “Come see a man who has told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah? Through the compassionate spirit of Jesus, she gained a new insight into who she was, and what she might be as a child of God. Her notorious reputation, her domestic tangles all are seen in a new context. They are no longer past sins barring a better future. The barrier is broken and a new spirit, a new conviction move her and inspire her to bring others to the light of God in Christ. It is interesting to note, too, that the disciples have already learned much from Jesus - after all, in buying food, they were dealing with the woman at the well. No one said, “Why are you talking with her?”

The old enmity between Samaritan and Jew is forgotten as a thing of the past. Jesus never could respect political, economic, social barriers - any barrier that would cut someone off from the love of God. And there is another barrier that he casually breaks through, too; and that is the sexist one that regards women as secondary in importance, and not to be treated as equals or even as deserving the same attention as men. Given the cultural tradition of the Middle East and the Jewish Patriarchical pattern, Jesus’ frequent concern for and attention to women - particularly women who have been rejected for their sins - Jesus’ loving concern is indeed remarkable.

So this is what must have sounded to Jewish ears as an astonishing story. Here is Jesus as the Messiah breaking through the image of a transcendent power to appear as a man, tired, weary, thirsty. Here is the Holy Son of God breaking through to pay attention to the troubles of a sinner. Here is Christ destroying the old political and religious barriers that separated Jew and Samaritan. Here is the Son of God showing loving concern and respect for a woman and welcoming her to the loving care of God.

And the new spirit of breaking the barriers separating man from God is beautifully expressed by the symbol of the water. The woman is drawing water from the deep and ancient well of Jacob. The water is still; it seeps in the bottom, and requires a leather bucket and long cord to draw it out. And so the Samaritans, (and the Jews, too, for that matter), drew their religious convictions from the Jacob’s wells of tradition — old laws, old histories whose living spirit had been lost. And so Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is asking you for a drink you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.” Now living water means running water; it suggests a pure bubbling spring, and this is always preferable to a well which may become stagnant or foul. And so the woman seems puzzled at this suggestion. “How can you furnish living, running water? Are you greater than Jacob? After all, the well was the best he could do.”

But somehow the symbol of the water begins to take on another meaning for her when
Jesus says, Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whosoever drinks of the water I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” The living water Jesus is speaking of now is not running bubbling water - it is the living water of the spirit.

And there is a whole Biblical tradition upon which His symbol of the water of the Spirit rests. The Psalmist speaks of how the soul thirsts, pants actually, after God. The people spoke of quenching the soul’s thirst with living water. The developed symbolism is best found in Revelation where it is promised, “To the thirsty I will give water without price from the fountain of the water of life.” Isaiah speaks of the “wells of salvation” and gives God’s promise to pour water on the thirsty land. Isaiah gives the invitation: “Ho everyone that thirsts, come to the waters”, and the water of life is understood, that which makes the land flourish as a garden, and that which, spiritually understood, in the soul springs up into everlasting life. Jeremiah complained that the people had forsaken the God who was the fountain of living waters to hew broken cisterns which would hold no water. Ezekiel had his vision of a river of life.

Jesus then was alluding to an old wish, an ancient promise, but His clear announcement that He was the source of the living water was a clear Messianic claim. The promise of Isaiah for the age to come was, “They shall not hunger or thirst”. As the Psalmist sang, “With thee is the fountain of life.” The living water is the creative spirit of God’s love which works within the heart of man to enable him to blossom forth in acts of creative love. There is a difference between a well and a living spring. From a well one ladles out spiritual nourishment. But a living spring of water that becomes within one a source of creative energy - this is something else, and this is what Jesus promises.

This is the spirit of God’s love in which we live and move and have our being. God has planted eternity in our hearts, and, as Augustine says, our hearts are restless until they find rest in God. There is a spiritual thirst for the eternal - and Jesus Christ is the source of that living water of life which alone can satisfy, which becomes in us a spring welling up into eternal life.