Two weeks ago, we came to the first half of this story, colloquially known as the story of the woman at the well. If you were with us two weeks ago, as we were continuing in our series “Thirst,” you’ll remember that we encountered a woman who, by all the hints in the text, had given up hope, but then she meets this man Jesus. Jesus spoke to the place of her desperation, the root of her restlessness, and even though they had met at a well, this place where thirsty people traveled and gathered to draw water, she heard Jesus speaking to what her thirst really was, to what was really at issue. Not a physical thirst, but a spiritual thirst, a thirst that God and God alone could quench, the same thirst that Augustine would speak of hundreds of years later in his *Confessions*, which we’ve been using to close in prayer each of these few weeks: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

When we read the first half of this woman’s story, we left off with the woman, having been struck by Jesus’ offer of “living water,” replying, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” And this week, Jesus answers that request, just not in the way she expected. Will you pray with me?

*Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.*

At holiday meals growing up, my sister and my cousins would have a running game on how long it would take for my grandfather to start complaining about some new technology. Conversation would start pleasantly enough, but we all knew it was only a matter of time before Papa managed to connect whatever it was we were talking about to why he didn’t like his new remote control, and then go off on a 15 minute rant. The point is, it was what he wanted to talk about. He was going to work it into the conversation.

I think that’s a bit of what’s going on in Jesus’ exchange with this Samaritan woman at the well when she asks him about true worship, because it’s a bit forced. If you were here two weeks ago, you’ll remember that this woman, just based on what is told and hinted at in the text, was in a desperate place in her life, perpetually vulnerable due to her marital history, shunned by others in the town, and had every reason to be skeptical and even hostile toward Jesus. But after Jesus demonstrates that he knows her, knows her history, cares about her, she’s least receptive to what he was saying, requesting that the “living water” that he had told her about.

Picking up in v. 19, she’s amazed, and says to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.” One would think at this point, with this man’s authority vindicated, she would go back to what she really wanted to know, that is, how to get that “living water.”

Except she doesn’t do that. Instead she adds, following in v. 20, “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, [the mountain nearby was a holy place for the Samaritans] but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” This is speaking to one big point
of tension between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans had a holy mountain, and even at times a temple, but for the Jews, the temple in Jerusalem was the only place for worship because that was where God dwelled among them. So, the Samaritan holy place was nothing less than idolatry and false worship. That’s what the woman is bringing up.

But if you’ve been reading along, you might be thinking, “How did we get to talking about worship? Just a moment ago, Jesus and this woman were talking about living water. Where did this come from?”

But in the same way that my grandfather would inevitably talk about his remote control, I think what we have here is this woman at the well showing what is really on her mind as she’s talking with Jesus. She wants to hear from this Jewish prophet what he has to say about the long running tension between the Samaritans and Jews.

And Jesus does. But he does so in a way that doesn’t forget what the conversation had been about in the first place. She wanted to know where to get this living water, this water that gushes up to eternal life within us, this water that would never leave her thirsty again. I think Jesus tells her, just in a way she doesn’t expect, and I think Jesus is telling us too.

He says in v. 23, “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” Now there’s a lot to chew on there, but it seems that Jesus is offering this new understanding of worship, worshiping God in spirit and in truth, that confounds the Samaritan woman’s understanding, that is, that you could worship either on the Samaritan holy mountain (if you were a Samaritan) or in Jerusalem (if you were a Jew), meaning, and that’s it. But what Jesus is saying means, no more preoccupation about places or temples or buildings or altars, it’s all about worshiping in spirit and in truth, because God is spirit.

So what does it mean, then, to worship God in spirit and truth?

About two weeks ago, a batch of bad storms and tornadoes swept through Dallas, TX. Unfortunately, one of the structures that was destroyed was First Mexican Baptist Church, a congregation geared to engage the growing Hispanic population in the city. The church would have to rebuild. Sadly, however, in this church’s history, compounding the devastation is the memory that 35 years ago, the church building had been destroyed in a fire, and the church had to rebuild then too. Now for the second time in 35 years, they would have to rebuild. It’s enough to dissuade any congregation.

But in the rubble, as the congregation cleaned up the debris, they discovered a Bible. This Bible dirt and mud on it and had some water damage from the storms, but it also had pages with burnt edges, meaning the Bible had been there 35 years ago through the fire years earlier, and now had come through the storm as well. One of the congregants, who was actually in the building when the tornado came through collapsing walls and ceilings, later said, “My faith is even stronger now. This is the second opportunity at life that God has given me.” This church, undeterred, made arrangements to worship in a tent the following Sunday. For them glorifying God was about much more than a building. They would rebuild, they would take care of their building, but worshiping the Lord was about more than a building.

I think if we were looking for a glimpse of what it might mean to worship in spirit and in truth, that’d be a good one.

I think we have another good one in the woman at the well and what she does. After this exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the disciples come back from the city, and the text tells us in v. 28, “Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city.” And she started to share news about this Jesus, this Christ, to the townspeople.
It’s a tiny detail, but it says that she left her water jar there at the well. Left her water jar. Remember, this was the very reason she came out to the well to begin with. She was thirsty. She had to get water for herself, for her home. She trekked all the way out of town to fill up this water jar. And you may remember from two weeks ago, there was likely another water source in the town itself, so the very act of her going out of the town to fill up her water jar was a sign of her alienation. For her it was another reminder of all the burdens, all the turmoil, all the desperation, all the restlessness, all the thirst she felt, and now, after this encounter with Jesus, she leaves it. There are other things more important to her.

Friends, as we speak of our thirst for God, our spiritual thirst for God, there are so, so many things that could burden us, things that could weigh us down, things we might think we’re using to satisfy ourselves, but ultimately they don’t do the trick either. If this whole exchange between Jesus and the woman at the well was Jesus telling her how to get this living water, the message it appears is to worship in spirit and in truth. It’s worship that is in grounded not in isolated instances of praise, but our very spirit. In Greek, that word “spirit” is the same as wind or breath, so it’s almost saying that’s worshiping God in how we breathe, it’s constant, it’s lifelong, it’s every day, every hour, every minute. And then we see this woman head toward the city, toward the people who had cast her out. And her worship, her service and seeking of the Lord, is indeed the peace in her heart. That peace isn’t idle; it drives her into action, into spreading the news.

Friends, our Lord here is telling us too, that if we would have this same living water, it is in serving and worshiping the Lord in every breath and utterance. And it’s not a transaction, as if by worshiping the Lord we earn or are rewarded with a satisfied life. It is in the very act, the very quality of a life lived for the Lord, rather than for ourselves, that we find our peace and our rest.

So what is it, then, that you would leave at the well? What are the burdens you carry, the things that hold you back? This woman had her water jar, and it represented everything that she had tried to use to satisfy her thirst, everything that had let her down, everything that was holding her back from a life of peace and rest in the Lord, and she left it behind, and went on to serve the Lord, to proclaim the good news that the Christ had come. But what will you leave at the well?

Will you pray with me?