

The Gospel of John

Session 3 John 4:1—54

I. John 4:1-15

1. 4:1-2 seems to contradict 3:22 but it is theologically important. This Gospel does not want Jesus to be thought of as a baptizer, however important baptism is. Jesus is the One who reveals God and, therefore, a firm line of demarcation must be drawn between John the Baptist and him. It is possible that 4:1-2 is a refinement of 3:22. While Jesus' ministry did involve baptism, the act was carried out by the disciples. In any case, we are not to think of Jesus as a "baptizer". Jesus and his disciples depart for Galilee and on the way of Samaria. 4:4 says that Jesus "had to pass through Samaria". Geographically speaking this is not true but 4:4 is probably speaking of "divine necessity".
2. Jesus and the disciples arrive in Samaria around midday and stop to rest at Jacob's well. The fact that he stops at Jacob's well (given to his son Joseph) hints that this is no mere rest stop. While at the well alone, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman. Violating three social conventions, he speaks to her and instructs her to give him some water from the well. In this culture, men did not speak to women with whom they had no relation and a Jewish man would certainly not have spoken to a Samaritan woman. Jesus' apparent willingness to receive something touched by a Samaritan is also irregular. 3:9 notes that Jews considered Samaritans unclean. What the woman says in 4:9 has a note of mockery to it: "What? You, a holier-than-thou Jew, are willing to have something touched by a Samaritan! Wow! Aren't you progressive!". Note that Jesus does not respond to this.
3. The first stage of their conversation is 4:10-14. Instead of replying to the woman's mockery, Jesus moves directly to presenting her with the truth and this truth is suggested by Jacob's well. The "gift of God" (4:10) is speaking to her and if she asks for it, she will receive "living water" (4:10) or eternal life. The woman chooses to understand "living water" in the same way that Nicodemus understood rebirth, that is in an earthly way. Jesus can't possibly offer any water because he has nothing to draw it from the well! The woman's question in 4:11-12 is *the question*: "Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob?". She finds it impossible to think that Jesus is greater than Jacob. Jesus responds to this by attempting to point her beyond the well. While Jacob did give this well, which still offers water, it remains the case that this water only satisfies a physical thirst and that whoever drinks from it will have to return for more. But Jesus offers a different kind of water. His "living water" leads to "eternal life" (4:12). Is there a "water" which permanently satisfies the deepest human thirst? Can human life be supernaturally transformed? (This was the question posed to Nicodemus.)
4. The woman replies to in 4:15 and it becomes clear that she is still working within the confines of what is familiar. She is happy to receive "living water" if this means she never has to return to the well again! What Jesus has said has been understood in an earthly sense and, thus, deeply misunderstood.

II. John 4:16-30

1. The conversation between Jesus and the woman is clearly faltering so Jesus redirects it in 4:16. Jesus' intent seems to be to dislodge her from her superficial understanding of "living water" and to draw her to a true understanding of himself. When Jesus asks her to get her husband, she replies that she has no husband and it emerges that the man with whom she is currently living is not her husband (4:17). Her marital life has been irregular. She has been married successively to five men and is now living with sixth. Jesus' knowledge of this woman's life is the turning point in their conversation.
2. In 4:19 the woman's posture toward Jesus changes. It began with mild mockery and skepticism (4:9, 11-12) and now moves to openness. Jesus is "a prophet" and so might have something worthwhile to say.
3. Since Jesus is a (Jewish) prophet, she puts before him a thorny issue for resolution. Briefly stated, the issue is this: Gerizim or Zion? Which one of the two temples is the place where God is to be worshiped? A dispute over this question was one of the main disagreements between Samaritans and Jews. Jesus is not being asked to settle it.
4. Jesus attempts to draw her beyond this dispute by pointing her to the time when this question will be rendered irrelevant (4:23-24). The worship of the Father "in spirit and truth" (4:23) will render this dispute irrelevant and so the attempt to resolve it is wasted effort. The partisan claims of Jews and Samaritans, used to buttress identities and reinforce positions, simply do matter. The "place" where God is to be worshipped will be "in the Son" and "through the Spirit". This is not to say that the question of Gerizim or Zion is simply a matter of opinion for "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22).
5. The true "place" of worship is, in fact, already here (4:23). Although the true "temple" was on Mt. Zion, Jesus is himself the "temple" (2:21). The Greek verb that John uses for "worship" in 4:23 literally means "to prostrate oneself before". One is not properly bowed to God by going to a mountain. One worships God by the quality of one's life and this quality can only be supplied by God. Because God is "spirit" (4:24), an all-pervading, non-physical Presence, only he can make appropriate worship possible. In this sense, the Temple on Mt. Zion was a means of forming proper worship, but it has been transcended in the Son. This is certainly not the answer that the woman expected from a Jewish prophet!
6. Just like Nicodemus, this woman, when challenged, falls back on what she knows. She knows that the Messiah is coming and that when he does all of this will be settled. It is worth noting the progression of the conversation. It begins with Jesus as a "Jew" (4:9), moves to Jesus as a "prophet" (4:19) and arrives at the mention of the Messiah. Does she think that Jesus could be the Messiah? It is difficult to say. Jesus responds with a self-disclosure which recalls the self-revelation of God in Exodus 3:14: "I who speak to you am he".
7. At 4:27 the disciples return (note 4:8) as this conversation has reached its final stage. They are simply shocked that Jesus is speaking with a woman not related to him (because this violates cultural convention). The disciples say nothing and the narrator has to say it for them: "What do you seek?" (4:27). Why would Jesus be speaking with a woman not related to him (and a Samaritan woman at that!). Jesus is still something of a mystery to them. In 4:28 the woman departs the scene, leaving her water jar behind. This is probably an indication that the narrative is not yet over. We must expect further developments. The woman has clearly moved from where she started but she has not yet arrived at the truth about Jesus. She is amazed as his knowledge of her life and she is willing to entertain the idea that he is the Messiah: "Can this be the Christ?" (4:29). This woman has progressed beyond Nicodemus who could not get beyond thinking of Jesus as a "teacher". Given the disparity between them, we are invited to see how strange this is.

III. John 4:31-38

1. The disciples have returned with food and urge Jesus to eat. The mention of food allows him to direct the conversation to his mission, moving from “food” to “harvest”. Just as the Samaritan woman could not accept Jesus’ word about “living water,” the disciples cannot accept his word about “food”. When he mentions another kind of food in 4:32, they can only imagine that someone else (the Samaritan woman?) has brought him something.
2. Jesus says something important about himself. His “food” is to do the Father’s will and to accomplish (or fulfill) his work (4:34). Completing the Father’s work is not a burden or mere form of obedience but, rather, the Son’s nourishment. The Son completes the Father’s work but not as a subordinate. He completes the Father’s work as one sent by the Father and as one who life consists in doing just this.
3. In 4:35-36 it becomes clear why Jesus has come through Samaria. He directs their attention to something they already know—the grain harvest is four months away. But there is another harvest that is taking place now, a harvest Jesus is already reaping (and the harvest appears in 4:39). The approach of the Samaritans shows that the fields really are “white for harvest” (4:35) and this harvest extends beyond Israel. The emphasis here is on the realization of God’s work. The completion of God’s work is not simply a future event but something that is happening now. The “sower” (Jesus) and the reapers (the disciples and others) can “rejoice together” because they are gathering “fruit for eternal life” (4:36). 4:38 reminds the disciples of their position. They are reaping a harvest that they did not sow. Who did sow this harvest? The answer seems to be John the Baptist and Jesus. It will be the position of the Church throughout history to reap a harvest she did not sow. Ultimately, the sower is God and the Church will always be in the position of “reaper”. It is the send of the Son and the sending of the Spirit which makes the sending of the Church possible.
4. While we have seen a stern critique of a faith based upon signs (2:23-25), this does not mean that the events of Jesus’ ministry are unimportant. Quite the contrary. The events of Jesus’ ministry (life, death, resurrection) are the source of Christian faith. Of course, merely knowing of these does not induce faith. John’s worldview is essentially sacramental; the physical is the point of departure for encountering God.

IV. John 4:39-42

1. In 4:39 the Samaritans come to the well to meet Jesus and the disciples seemingly vanish. Their faith is clearly partial and was initially based upon the woman’s partial witness to Jesus.
2. Jesus is asked to stay with the Samaritans and does so for two days. Note that the hostility between Samaritans and Jews seems to be overcome.
3. What the Samaritans say in 4:42 is of great significance. Their faith began with the witness of the woman, but it has now gone beyond this. They have accepted the word of Jesus and this has brought their faith to fulfillment. Jesus is not a “prophet” or even the Christ but “the Savior of the world” (cf. 3:17).

V. John 4:43-54

1. Jesus now departs from Samaria and goes to Galilee (4:43). Once there, he goes to Cana (cf. 2:1-11) and then to Capernaum (cf. 2:12).
2. At Capernaum, there is an official (of Herod Antipas?) whose son is “at the point of death” (4:47). Just as the Samaritans had heard about Jesus from the Samaritan woman (4:39), this official has heard about Jesus and this prompts him to seek Jesus out.
3. Jesus’ response to this man is at first abrupt and it is a warning against expecting “signs and wonders” (4:48). Signs and wonders are not the foundation of true faith and they are not to be sought after.

4. Two themes emerge at this point. First, it is not Jesus' presence that heals but his word. This is in keeping with 1:1-2. Second, true faith is faith in Jesus' word (4:53). Jesus does not wish to be perceived as a wonder worker but as God's powerful Word present in history. Signs may point to faith, but they are not its substance.
5. 4:54 notes that this is the second "sign" which Jesus has wrought. The first sign (2:1-11) points to Jesus bringing about the marriage between God and his people while this second sign points to Jesus as bringing Life to humankind.

VI. Reflection on John 4:31-34

1. Commenting on this text, Origen of Alexandria notes that the will of the Son and the will of the Father are indistinguishable. This is not a case of two wills which might be in conflict or a case of one will dominating another but, rather, a matter of the two wills being perfectly harmonious. This is why in 10:30 Jesus declares that he and the Father are one.
2. Origen thinks that the "food" of which Jesus speaks here is Wisdom in that the Son and the Father share perfectly in the Wisdom. Jesus' work, Origen says, is to reform human beings in the Wisdom of God such that doing the will of God becomes not a mere obedience but a joy, a feeding and sustenance. (*Commentary on John*)