

# *Remaining in Christ: Jesus' 'I AM' Statements in the Gospel of John*

## **Session II - Living Water**

### Commentary and notes on the Passage

We recently had the experience of being on pilgrimage at Jacob's Well in Palestine, the very well where Jesus had this extraordinary conversation with a Samaritan woman. The church there is filled with icons, several of which depict the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. One of the interesting features of these icons is the way in which Jesus and the woman are so totally engaged in their conversation. They look at each other, eye to eye, and gesture animatedly across the well. These icons convey what you can see when the story is laid out as we have done above, with the conversational volley clearly delineated. Some commentators have noted that the woman actually leads Jesus increasingly toward the claiming of his identity by her intense questioning [Lord (the same word as "sir"), Prophet, Messiah].

An important dimension of this story is that it occurs at noon, when the sun is brightest. Within the Gospel of John, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman serves as a contrast to his encounter with Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes by night (John 3:2), and never really understands what Jesus is saying. The woman, on the other hand, is not only open to learning, but she brings her entire community into relationship with Jesus. In Christian tradition, she has been given the name "Photini," which means "Light," or "Enlightened One."

The comments below serve to focus our attention on how the woman models Christian discipleship by engaging Jesus with her whole mind and heart.

- **Fearless questioning.** Notice that the woman is never afraid that Jesus could be offended by her questions or statements, or that he will look down on her, even though she is very aware of how Jews regard Samaritans. She tells Jesus what she sees and what she knows, and she is open to having her view expanded. Together, Jesus and the woman model what it looks like for a teacher and student to be completely engaged in a learning process. For the woman, this conversation is a first taste of "living water." For Jesus, it is food (John 4:34).
- **Having the right desire.** This story has echoes of the betrothal stories of the Old Testament, in which the patriarchs and their emissaries meet their future brides at wells or springs (Isaac, Gen 24:15-26; Jacob, Gen 29:9-12). But here, the desire that is piqued is the most elemental human desire for water, which is equated with the equally fundamental human need for wisdom. The equation of water and wisdom in the story helps make it clear that just as water is essential to life, so wisdom is essential to fullness of life (here called "eternal life," life without bounds). Verses 13-15 are the heart of the conversation, as Jesus describes clearly what he is offering, and the woman asks to receive it.

- **The food of Jesus.** Jesus' actual disciples don't come off so well in this story. They've gone off to get lunch, and are surprised to find Jesus in conversation with the woman. They are clearly out of sorts to find their role taken over in their absence, and by a Samaritan woman, no less! Jesus uses their consternation as a teaching moment: "I have food to eat that you do not know about.... My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." These words of Jesus provide us with a window into his interior life, and his seemingly endless energy for ministry: it feeds him. The Gospel of John uses these very basic aspects of human life as a way of getting us to see how very fundamental our relationship with God is. It is as necessary to us as water, as food, as light.