



Lent 4

3/15/2026

John 4:5-20

What Are You Chasing?

Christopher McCandless. A young man fed up with modern life, and went to seek deeper meaning in the wilderness. In 1990, he travelled alone across the country until reaching the Alaskan wilderness, where he lived alone for around 113 days. During his stay, he ended up eating poisonous seeds of a wild potato plant, weakening to the point that he could not gather food for himself, and he ended up passing away. When he was found, there was a small book with him where he kept notes. In the book was a note that was believed to be one of the last he wrote before he died. It was just 5 words: HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED. A tragic note. Took him being alone in the wilderness to realize something that had been true all along. I suppose you can spend your life chasing the extraordinary so much that you never even stop to enjoy the little, ordinary, beautiful things that are around you all the time.

This isn't just a modern problem. In our text for today, we meet a woman from two thousand years ago whose life, in many ways, was similar to McCandless.

There isn't much we know about this woman. We don't even know her name. She was a Samaritan, a person from the region between Judea and Galilee, a place that Jews usually tried to avoid because they wanted nothing to do with the people who lived there. We also know she was living a sinful life. Over the years she had had five husbands. But not even the fifth husband stuck around too long because by the time she speaks with Jesus she is living with another man, one that she isn't even married to.

Why did she choose to live this way? It's impossible to say for sure. But allow me to take an educated guess: she was chasing something. Was it pleasure? That could be part of it. But if I had to take a guess, I would venture to say the real reason was something deeper. That this woman wanted belonging. Acceptance. Someone who loved her for her. And she looked for it in all the wrong places.

Does that sound familiar?

Think of the kid who hangs out with the wrong crowd at school. He knows it's bad, maybe feels uncomfortable about it a lot of the time. But they give him a place to sit when he eats in the lunchroom. People to walk with in the halls. People to text at night so he doesn't feel so alone.

Think of the man who is taking another drink. He really doesn't like the taste anymore, but once you get past that he does briefly find what he's looking for. Calm. Peace. A pause to the endless parade of criticisms and feelings of failure. The numbness feels better than sinking into those thoughts again.

Or maybe think of the girl in that relationship, very similar to the woman from Samaria. There are times where she hates herself for it, feels crushed by the guilt and the shame, sheds tears in the night that no one else sees. But she can't bring herself to walk away, no matter how bad it gets, because she can't shake the feeling that if she turns away there won't be anyone else there.

There's smaller ones too. You lose yourself in work as you chase that feeling of accomplishment – or avoid that feeling of uselessness. You chase the brain static feeling you get from doom scrolling through a social media feed because it's better than thinking about your problems. Or maybe the thing you are chasing keeps on changing because once you do manage to get that promotion, or that dream home, or retirement, it's not as fulfilling as you thought it would be. It never feels like you've actually arrived. You still haven't found what you're looking for.

So whatever it is you keep chasing. Because whether you're after belonging, value, identity, or whatever else, if you go looking for the earthly kind it will be like chasing a mirage. You see the shimmer on the horizon, and it looks like water, but once you get closer it's nothing but hot pavement or sand. That's not what you need. That hole, that intense dissatisfaction you feel in your heart can't be satisfied with things that are temporary. But only with things that are eternal.

But where can we go to find things that truly last forever? To answer that question, we need to join the Samaritan woman at the well just outside Sychar.

As she walks up to it with her bucket, I don't think she was expecting all that much from the tired Jewish stranger who was sitting not too far away. She probably felt a little awkward as she tried to go about her business, politely ignoring him and avoiding eye contact.

But then, shockingly, he speaks! This was unheard of – it was official Jewish custom to give Samaritans the cold shoulder – and if the man had started off with a personal question the woman probably would have tried to dodge it and move on. But the request this man makes is so simple she can't help but engage. He wants to talk about mundane things – water of all things – but it quickly becomes clear that this man knows something that the woman doesn't. If this conversation took place in 2026 she might have thought he was about to try to sell her Gatorade or Liquid IV or something. She's intrigued enough to ask for more information, and Jesus tells her: READ v. 14.

"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

When she hears those words the woman thinks to herself: I can't miss out on that! It would solve so many of my problems! I spend a huge chunk of my day marching to this well and back to get the water that I need. I'd get so much time back! I'd actually have time for other things. When she says "Give me this water" she is basically saying "Sign me up!!"

And that's when things get personal.

Jesus asks about her husband. The woman awkwardly tries to deflect, and that's when it becomes clear that Jesus knows about all her problems already. Can't imagine how much of a shock that was!

Or can we?

Because I think you know as well as I do that in these verses, Jesus isn't just talking to the Samaritan woman. He is also talking to you. He is looking at this woman specically, but also every sinner who has ever existed, and he is saying: "You know that thing that embarrasses you that you thought was hidden and secret? I already know what it is. That part of your life you don't want anyone to find out about? I know. That thing you've been chasing for all this time? Belonging, peace, security... yes, I know that too. And I want to tell you that those earthly things, perhaps even sinful things that you think will satisfy? They won't. They're taking you farther away from me. No matter how good or understandable or justifiable you think your intentions are, they have already started to pave a road that leads to hell."

Jesus manages to say all that in a way that is so brief and disarming. To the Samaritan woman. And also to me and you.

And the Samaritan woman's reaction shows she is beginning to grasp Christ is more than just a Jewish stranger. So you're a prophet, she says... but then, feeling defensive, instead of talking about her real problem she changes the subject. "Oh, this is just because I'm a Samaritan..."

But Jesus won't let the conversation die. He engages briefly, points out some of the spiritual problems the Samaritans had, but then goes on to say "the Father wants people who worship in Spirit and in truth." Change is coming. In fact, it's already here.

Where is all this going? What is Jesus trying to do with this conversation?

Layer by layer, Christ pulls back this woman's justifications, motivations, and desires so that he can finally highlight her desperate need.

Jesus looks at this woman and says: "You don't just want love, but love that never runs out. You don't just want to be in a place where you're tolerated, you want to be valued. Prioritized. Fought for. You don't need to keep finding new things or flings that make you momentarily stop thinking about your problems. What you need is something that will make your mistakes, your shame, your regrets to disappear. To be forgotten forever. To be forgiven. Woman," Jesus says, "I know what you need." READ verses 25 and 26.

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

We live in a world where everyone is chasing something, where you can spend your whole life chasing and never find what you're looking for.

But the person you need, the One you need, has always been chasing you.

This meeting at the well was no coincidence. In the verse right before our reading starts it says that Jesus "had" to go through Samaria. Geographically speaking that's not true. Jews took the long way around Samaria all the time. Really, Jesus had to? Yes. Because he had to speak with this one woman. He was planning this the whole time.

So with that in mind, do you really think you being in church today is a coincidence? No way. Jesus has been planning this too.

Jesus set a time to talk with you today. He has chased you down. It's amazing how he always knows just the thing to say. In many ways his words expose our secrets, our shame, our sins. It's an uncomfortable experience sometimes. But that's a good thing. Because Jesus doesn't bring those things out into the open to build a case against you. He brings them out into the open so that HE can deal with them FOR you.

If you want a reminder of how he does that, just look to the cross at the front of church. That is the place where Christ made your shame his shame. Where he bore the weight of all the wrongs you had done. Where he became your sin and died.

But death did not stop God's march through history. Jesus walked out of the grave alive. He sent out his followers to share the good news. He went back into heaven to rule all things, preserving the gospel, spreading it throughout the world... until the day the gospel came to you.

The way that God came to you, the day that he created faith in your heart, probably seems pretty ordinary. A seemingly coincidental conversation with a Christian stranger or friend. A little water on a baby's head. There was no light from heaven, no vision of angels. But don't miss out on the beauty of the ordinary. Because through those outwardly simple, humble means God gave you the living water. He gave you the gift of Himself. And because God has done that for you, do you know what that means? You will never be thirsty again.

So maybe as you look at your life right now, you still find desires that aren't satisfied, earthly speaking. Pain. Grief. Anxiety. The list goes on. "Not thirsting" doesn't mean those problems magically go away. But it does mean that God has dug the well of faith in your heart, one that's constantly overflowing not because of how awesome you feel or how faithful of a believer you are on your own, but because the Holy Spirit is constantly blessing it, filling it, as he assures you of his eternal promises.

How does the Holy Spirit do those things? Through the Word. The Word that reminds you of the day you were baptized, the Word that reminds you that in Christ you are already forgiven. Through his Word God gives you exactly what you need.

And it's that very Word that opens our eyes to the need of the people around us. You don't need me to tell you we live in a world that's missing, well, a lot of things. Justice. Compassion. Patience. Peace. All of the above. Unbelievers feel that too. They have a God sized hole in their hearts. I heard a pastor say recently that we live in a world full of people who are "Christ haunted".

When you see that, take a page out of Jesus' book. If you have a family member, perhaps your own child, who has walked away from the faith, you may be hoping for one extraordinary moment, one time or place to witness to them that's just right. That perfect moment might not come. But that's ok. Get comfortable in the ordinary. Be a person that's there for them. A listening ear, eager to give the gift of unhurried time – just like Jesus did. Pray for the opportunities – they'll come. And when they do you'll rejoice to know it's the Holy Spirit, not you, working through simple words to give living water to another thirsty soul.

I'm sure all of us have heard of people who go on trips to "find themselves" or who bury themselves in hobbies or trips or bad habits to chase after something – or try to run away from themselves. Thank God that for Christians the chase is over. Your Savior is already here. He has already found you. And he will continue speaking with you and holding you close to his heart forever. Amen.

