

Wellspring

By

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Once she deemed it safe to rise, Miriamne quietly busied herself around the little house. Not that it was her house. It was never her house. Not a home. Just a place to lay down her head in exchange for some bread baking, water carrying, and other duties. This one was better than some, worse than others. Not that she complained.

She had complained. Not to Jophed, but before. She'd dared to suggest that Ephraim leave his field-mudded sandals outside. The beating she'd endured taught her a valuable lesson, as her then-husband had intended. For weeks purple bruises had darkened the wine colored stain that had always covered half her face. No one noticed or asked about the bruises, of course. Her neighbors had long since ceased to see her disfigurement. They didn't even look past it, as some had when she was a child. They simply didn't see her anymore.

She wasn't afraid that Jophed would strike her. He was a gentle, lazy giant. But he might grow weary of her, tell her to find a new place to live, were she to complain.

Miriamne placed her mother's old jar at the doorway and looked over to see Jophed sprawled across the pallet. His hairy legs and gnarly feet were visible as the thin wool blanket covered only his rear-end. He lay face down with his equally hairy arms thrown up over his head. His furry back rose and fell with the breaths of deep sleep. She could see the spittle drooling out of his open mouth and onto the robe he had wadded up under his head. He had stumbled in just before the rising sun. Miriamne had pretended to sleep while he noisily removed sandals and robe, and awkwardly lowered himself to the bed in the corner of the

hovel they shared. She continued to feign sleep until she heard his breathing slow and settle into that of deep sleep, interrupted only by noisy snores and some drunken mumbling.

After carefully rising she swept and quietly took a couple of floor mats out for a shake while it was still mostly dark. Then she sat on the one stool, by the narrow window slit, and ate three dates left over from last year's harvest, and a piece of yesterday's bread, with the last of the water she would allow herself. She was thirsty but dared not drink the dregs of the stale water for fear that Jophed might wake and ask for some before she could get to the well. By being careful with what she allowed herself, she usually didn't need to make daily trips to Jacob's Well. If she made one of the trips on Shabbat then she was able to keep her visits to three, maybe four per week. She felt some shame about carrying water on Shabbat but it was the only day she could go in the cool of the day. The only day she could be sure no one else would be there.

The neighborhood men had gone to the fields while it was still dark. As the light changed from gray to blue to golden, Miriamne listened to the sounds of women passing the little hut, going both to and then from the well and back to their homes. The sounds of their chatter, gossip and laughter mixed with the voices of their small children playing together, in a musical chorus. As the sun rose higher and the air became hot, the sounds of the village faded. Children would soon be coaxed into resting. Mothers might use the quiet midday hours to mend a tunic or start their bread dough for the next day's baking. Eventually Miriamne sensed that the town had grown as still as the midday air.

After carefully arranging her veil so it covered the right side of her face, she lay aside the crumbling mat that served as a make-shift door. She'd attempted a few times to fortify the rushes with some twigs, but her efforts were poor and she

knew she'd soon have to look for an alternate way to discourage the intrusion of stray dogs and the stares of passers-by.

The sun was high as Miriamne hung a small jug from one shoulder and raised her empty water jar to the other. She made her way down the dusty track that served as a road for Sychar, carefully picking her way around dung piles, left by donkey and dog. Three houses down a woman, with a baby wrapped and resting on her hip and a toddler at her feet, shook out her own floor mat. Instinctively, Miriamne raised her hand briefly to greet Shoshonna. Without seeming to see her, the other woman's eyes narrowed before she sniffed and snatched up the toddler by one arm and hurried to duck back into her own little home.

Sighing Miriamne recalled the laughter they had shared while making countless trips down this same dirt track fetching water for their mothers. It seemed so long ago that they were girls together. And yet not so long ago.

She turned her face away from the village doorways and kept her head erect, eyes forward. If any of the other women were looking out of their homes to pass judgment as she passed by, she'd not deign to acknowledge them.

With the village houses at her back she breathed a little easier.

Her relief was short lived though, as a group of men now approached from the direction of the well. Miriamne recognized none at first glance. As they drew closer she realized that they were not village men, but Jews. How strange that this large group should appear in Sychar. An occasional traveler, or even a small family would sometimes travel the Samaritan Road between Judea and Galilee. But rarely would those travelers venture off the highway and into the villages for fear of speaking to Samaritans. Honestly, what did they fear? Samaritanism wasn't catching, like lice or leprosy.

Miriamne drifted to the right edge of the road as the group approached. She kept her eyes forward and pulled her veil close to obscure most of her face. In her

peripheral vision, she watched the men, weary from the road, but in high spirits, pass by. In spite of her fear, they seemed not to see her as they joked and jostled one another. She heard one mention food, and realized that they were likely on their way to the inn on the far end of town. Miriamne knew the place well. She'd often had to drag Jophed or one of his predecessors out of it.

Once the men passed her, she moved the empty jar from one shoulder to the other. When she looked down she cast no shadow, the sun was so high in the sky. It was beating down on her and she dreaded the return trip with the jar full of water.

If only she could come to the well in the early morning when the other women did. But they had let her know in many ways, petty and cruel, that she was not worthy to draw water alongside them and their daughters. Eventually they had grown bored of picking at or taunting her and had instead settled into a routine of ignoring her completely. For several years now, Miriamne had been all but invisible to the women of the village. If any children present happened to speak to or about Miriamne they were quickly corrected. After one mother had slapped her child for waving at her, Miriamne had stopped coming when there was any chance children might be present.

When other women were around, the men ignored her as completely as did their wives. But the few times she'd tried to visit the well after sundown, she'd soon realized her mistake. Village men returning late from the fields had stared openly at her in a way that they never would have dared had their women been there. She'd rarely felt truly endangered, but she knew from past experience that it only took one man, alone with no witnesses, to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity. Miriamne wouldn't give anyone that opportunity again.

The track became a trail as it dipped down an incline and around a slight curve. The well was in sight. But so was someone else. The unexpected visitor

was seated stooped at the side of the well with his or her back to Miriamne. Probably an old woman from the village, late to the well and sitting to rest up for the trip back.

Miriamne paused, unsure whether or not to approach. Some of the old women could be as cutting in their remarks as the housewives, though without husbands they had no cause for jealousy. It was always a relief when they just chose not to see her. A relief, but lonely.

Then the figure turned and looked in Miriamne's direction. She saw clearly now that he was a Jew. His dress and beard were unmistakably Galilean. Far from relieving her anxiety, the sight of a Galilean Jew sitting alone at Jacob's Well sent her emotions into a spin. If her water jar hadn't been empty save for the last bit she'd poured out into a bowl, she'd have turned back now. But without water she and Jophed couldn't wash, and she couldn't cook their supper. After a night of drinking he would be parched, and she really wanted him to wash his hands before rubbing them all over her.

After some moments of hesitation while Miriamne tried to figure out if the stranger would move on or not, she finally took a couple of steps toward the well.

When he didn't speak or even look up, she grew a little bolder. She unshouldered her mother's jar, and began to set it down. She nearly dropped it when he spoke.

"A drink of water would be appreciated." His baritone voice was clear, not loud. His request was just that, a request, not a demand. And she thought she could hear a smile in his voice. Not a mocking, cruel smile, but a friendly one, meant to put her at ease. She slowly set the jar on the ground at her feet. Then she took the smaller jug from her shoulder.

She saw that he had no water vessel. Would he have simply waited until someone showed up with one? At this time of day he might have been in for a long wait. When she didn't move to draw water, he repeated his request, "A drink would be welcome."

Keeping the covered, right side of her face carefully turned away from the bold stranger, Miriamne attached the long rope that lay neatly coiled at the base of the wall surrounding the well to the smaller vessel. She lowered her cracked and leaky drawing jug into the well and pulled it up again. She set it down near the man and took a step back. The Galilean took the jug and drank deeply from it as water poured over his beard and down the front of his finely woven robe. Then he did the most astounding thing yet. He offered the vessel back to her, as if offering her a drink in turn.

The Samaritan woman felt her face flush. The right side of her face was hot as she pressed her hand against the blood colored stain. She turned her shoulder to him, as she waved the proffered jug away. In spite of his penetrating stare, felt rather than seen, she found her voice, though it came out barely above a whisper.

"How is it you're asking me for a drink? You know I'm a Samaritan, don't you?" She dared to look up, and caught part of his face and his expression as she glanced at him from under her veil. He looked at her with amusement, but not in the mocking way with which she was so familiar. After taking another long draught, he set the jug down on the edge of the well.

Miriamne reached out cautiously and pulled it toward her once she was certain the man wouldn't grab her. She turned toward the well. She could feel the stranger's eyes on her as she poured the rest into her water jar. It would take ten jugfuls to fill the old jar, the only thing left that had belonged to her mother.

She lowered and pulled the jug up twice more before he spoke again. What he said surprised her. It didn't seem to answer her first question and created many more.

"God wants to give you so much more than water. If you only knew to whom you speak, you'd be the one asking to have your thirst satisfied." She stopped mid-pour and looked at him. She searched again for any hint of mockery or contempt. Miriamne had never in her whole life had anyone look at her with the sincerity she saw there.

"What if I told you I could supply you with fresh, living water?"

Miriamne looked down into the half-emptied jug she held in her hands. It wasn't fresh. At this time of year, with the well so low, it was a bit brackish and had plant matter and other unidentifiable bits floating in it. Certainly no one could describe it as alive.

Now she knew he must be having fun at her expense. What did he want from her? She finished pouring the water into her jar and lowered the jug for another dip.

She could tell he was awaiting her answer, as if what she had to say next really mattered to him. As she poured the next jugful into the jar she looked at him. What she saw now in his eyes surprised her. It wasn't so much amusement as affection. She dismissed that notion as preposterous.

Too many times in her life she'd fallen for a look that said what she wanted to see, only to find herself at the butt end of a nasty joke. Now she began to calculate how little water she could draw before leaving the well. If she only half-filled it, she would have to return tomorrow, but that might be worth getting out from under the disturbing gaze of this mysterious stranger.

But then she looked again and saw something else. Something that made her want to find out what more he might say. She set the empty jug on the wall.

“Sir, where is your vessel? In fact where is this amazing well from which you’d draw this delightful water? You’ve tasted what’s coming from this well.” She paused, amazed at her own new-found boldness in the presence of this stranger. She looked at him expectantly for some moments before continuing. “This well was a gift to us from our father Jacob. Who are you to give a greater gift than that?” Arms crossed, it was Miriamne’s turn to await his answer.

“Not only would you never thirst, after drinking the water I have to give, but you would have life-giving water enough to give away. Others would live because of what you can give them.” He hadn’t actually answered her question, but she didn’t feel as though he was ignoring her. She knew what that felt like. It was as if he knew what her real questions were, and he answered those instead of the spoken ones.

“Sir, I want that water. May I never have to come here to draw water again.”

This time the stranger did pause. Miriamne began to lower the jug again into the well. She felt his eyes on her as she drew it up again. It was some minutes until he spoke.

“Go and call your husband here.”

Miriamne knew now that their conversation was at an end. She would never know the answers to the questions she had yet to ask. She lowered the drawing jug back into the well. As she pulled it up again, she paused a moment to draw her veil closer around the disfigured side of her face. “I don’t have a husband,” she whispered.

The stranger was standing beside her now. He took the worn rope from her hands and began to draw the water jug up himself. Miriamne thought her astonishment couldn’t grow any deeper. She was wrong.

“You’re right to say that you haven’t a husband. You’ve called five men ‘husband,’ and the one you live with now doesn’t think enough of you to call you ‘wife.’ That’s the truth of it, isn’t it?”

From anyone else, Miriamne would have heard his words as violently as a blow from any fist. But somehow, in spite of the hard truth he spoke, she felt a sense of caring that she’d not known since her mother had died so many years ago.

She dared to look at him. His eyes revealed what she longed to see there. He saw her. He knew her and he saw her and still he cared about her. She had to sit on the edge of the well before her knees gave out. The man emptied the water jug into the jar and lowered it again.

It was some minutes before she found her voice again. When she did speak any hint of bemused sarcasm on her part was gone. Forever.

“Sir. You’re a prophet, aren’t you? Why come here? You Jews say that we can only worship in Jerusalem, even though our fathers have worshiped the one God here from the ages.” What she really wanted to say was, “take me with you to Jerusalem!” But she knew better. Then he answered her unspoken request.

“Woman. Listen carefully to what I have to say. The time will come when you won’t need to go to Jerusalem, nor even leave this hilltop, to worship God the Father.” To her further astonishment, she found him kneeling beside her, so he could better look up into her face.

“You and your fathers have had the faith to worship what they can’t know, while the Jews have all they need to offer salvation to all. But soon true worshipers will worship anywhere, will come from everywhere, for true worship will be in spirit. Those who know the truth will worship in truth, and by the spirit. That’s who the Father seeks. You know the truth. The Father is Spirit. Those who know him worship him in truth and in spirit.”

All traces of timidity fell away, as Miriamne looked straight into the eyes of this man and knew him. She spoken in confident, but hushed tones.

“Messiah is coming. That much I know. And when he comes, he’ll answer all our questions.”

She searched his face for any hint that she’d gone too far. Instead she heard him say in a quiet voice meant only for her, “I am the one.”

He rose then and lowered the jug into the well. They could hear men’s voices. Miriamne used the end of her veil to wipe away the tears she hadn’t noticed were flowing. Then she carefully arranged her veil so it once again covered her wine-stained cheek. When had her veil fallen back? For how long had she allowed this stranger to see the whole of her disfigured face?

As the group neared, Miriamne recognized them as the men she’d seen on her way to the well. She saw their questioning looks directed to the stranger, though no one spoke to or about her. Nor did they ask him why he was filling her water jar, though she could see that they really wanted to.

He put the jug down, smiled and nodded to her.

Miriamne felt a rushing in her head. And she seemed suddenly to need to speak, but not to these men. She wanted to tell her story, but to whom? She backed away and found herself walking swiftly back up toward Sychar.

She entered the little house she shared with Jophed. He was sitting up on the pallet, naked but for the worn blanket around his middle. He yawned and scratched his chest. Miriamne realized then that she’d left her mother’s jar at the well, along with the drawing jug. She grabbed the bowl that held the last of yesterday’s water and handed it to him.

“Get dressed, Jophed! You’ve got come to the well with me! There’s a man there who saw me and knew all I’d ever done. I think he’s the Messiah!”

Then she left him without waiting for him to answer her or ask any questions, and ran to the benches that lined the city gate. The old men of the city sat throwing lots, or dozing in the afternoon sun. Later she was in awe that she had the boldness to speak to the elders there.

“You need to come! Come to the well. There’s a stranger there. A Galilean who told me all I ever did. Come and see for yourself if he’s the Messiah!”

She ignored the jeers of the old men and ran on to the inn. Here were the men whose sons tended their fields or who decided they were too hungover from last night to work in the hot sun. Miriamne told them the same things she’d told Jophed and the old men. They questioned the reliability of her story, and wondered amongst themselves why the promised Messiah would ever dirty his sandals with the dust of Sychar. But the novelty of a stranger who spoke to a Samaritan woman, and especially to a woman of Miriamne’s reputation, was too much to ignore. The days were long and any distraction from their own familiar stories, told over and over again, was a welcome change. But they all agreed not to tell their wives from whom they’d learned about the mysterious visitor. There was no need for that sort of trouble.

By the time Miriamne had visited the city gate, the inn and a couple of nearby fields and was headed back to the well, the women of the town had noticed the commotion and come from their houses to see what was going on. They came out with their children and babes to see their men headed down the track and toward the well. They didn’t see Miriamne at the head of the crowd. They grabbed any of their own empty water jars and followed the men. After all, if they were going to make an extra trip to the well, it would be a shame to come home without extra water.

By the time Miriamne returned to the well, she was at the head of a large group of people. As she rounded the curve, she could see the stranger and the

other men, reclining in the meager shade of an ancient olive tree. They sat or lay in a circle with the Galilean their focus. He was speaking as the others listened intently.

She heard him raise his voice as the crowd behind her came into view, "Look there! There is the field that is white for harvest!" And all the men under the tree looked up to see the men, women and children of Sychar following Miriamne. "I sent you to reap, but another has harvested before you." And the Galilean laughed.

Two days later, after Jesus and his followers were again on their way to Galilee, Miriamne opened the make-shift door of her little home and stepped out into the cool of the morning, allowing the warming sun to shine on her face. Jophed had left and moved in with his brother's family. He gave the little house to Miriamne to use, for he knew she had nowhere else to go. She hung the cracked jug over one shoulder and lifted the empty water jar to the other. She began to make her way down the track that led to Jacob's Well.

Three doors down, Shoshonna shook out a rug while her babe slept heavily on her back. She raised her hand to Miriamne and smiled a little. Miriamne waved back. The toddler at Shoshonna's knee took his hand out of his mouth and waved, too, as she passed by.

Miriamne could hear a group of women chattering and laughing as they approached her from behind and Miriamne moved to one side. They passed her, then grew quiet. They slowed, then stopped and turned to face her. She steeled herself for whatever they had to say.

The eldest of the group, a woman who had been a friend of her mother's, spoke, "Miriamne, join us?"

She smiled tentatively and moved her mother's old jar from one shoulder to the other. As the group turned to follow the track to the well, Miriamne joined them, no longer invisible.

Dedicated to Lahai-Roi, the God Who Sees