

*Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:1-42*

*Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway*

*March 12, 2023*

## Come and See

This year, during the Lenten season, our suggested gospel readings for each of the Sunday mornings invite us to reflect on some of the stories of encounters between Jesus and people he meets in his travels that are told for us in the gospel of John. John is, in fact, a difficult gospel for many. It is not like the other three. They are considered the Synoptic Gospels, more or less a synopsis of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. John is, well, John. It has been viewed as anti-Semitic, preaching exclusivism and prone to long complex monologues. Yet it also contains some of the most well known and beautiful prose ever written. It is not an easy book of the Bible, if there is such a thing. But despite its complexities, it has much to teach us about God who we come to know in Jesus Christ.

Last week Irene focused on the story of Nicodemus and the familiar, “For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son...” She talked of how Nicodemus, a man of high regard in his community, came to Jesus in the dark of night with questions, seeking to understand this man and his teachings. This morning we continue on to the very next chapter of the gospel and hear the story of the Samaritan woman at the well - another seeker, although in this case Jesus finds her rather than the other way around.

I struggled a bit with how to present this story. The length of it makes it cumbersome for a Sunday morning worship service. But the content makes it too good to pass up.

With this in mind I invited Bob, Judy and Irene to help me share this story of the conversation between the woman at the well and Jesus. I am going to weave sermon around their enactment of the entire story. For those among us who are visual learners and find it helpful to see the words as well as hear them, the text that they will be enacting is pretty much word for word what you will find in your pew Bibles if you would like to follow along that way.

Bob and Irene would you please come on up here now? Judy will come along in a moment.

As the story opens we hear that Jesus is leaving Judea to head back to Galilee because of some implied tension between Jesus and the Pharisees, because of the success of his ministry. Many are being baptized. The Pharisees are becoming uneasy with this new preacher.

So, Jesus is on a journey. The direct path from Judea to Galilee take travelers through Samaria. Yet most Jews of Jesus' time would opt to travel all the way around Samaria rather than going through it. So despised, and feared, were the Samaritan people. Therefore, many scholars believe that the 'had to' in this story regarding Jesus' route is not so much a matter of geography as it is one of theology. Jesus felt called to go to Samaria.

When Jesus arrives Samaria he meets a woman.....

*<sup>1</sup>Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" <sup>2</sup>—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—<sup>3</sup>he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But Jesus had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup>So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.*

*<sup>7</sup>A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." <sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." <sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" <sup>13</sup>Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." <sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."*

The dialogue between this woman and Jesus is the longest conversation of Jesus recorded in the scriptures. Where, as Irene pointed out last week, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, a Jewish man of status and authority, just a few verses before is short and held in the dark of night, this conversation with an unnamed woman of foreign descent is long, engaged and held in the noon day sun.

The Jews and Samaritans had been divided for centuries by hostility and deep prejudice. Though they shared a common heritage each claimed that they were the bearers of the true faith of ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup> Their main difference was over the location of the holy place of worship. The Jews thought it was Jerusalem. The Samaritans thought it was Mount Gerizim. This comes up later in their conversation. The Jews considered Samaritans heretics, unclean and people to be avoided. Yet in this story it is a Samaritan and a woman to whom Jesus speaks.

Dr. Frances Taylor Gench, Presbyterian pastor and on the faculty at Union Seminary in Virginia, in her book, *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* points out that when this gospel was written, a bit later than the other three gospels, Christians who were followers of John's teachings were beginning to welcome converts from Samaria. They were beginning to open up. For the writer John, and for his first hearers this unnamed woman represents the Samaritan people.

So Jesus and this woman talk. They share a conversation about water. As with Nicodemus, Jesus pushes the woman to think beyond what she understands. Unlike Nicodemus the woman remains engaged and keeps up a lively conversation. "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming to draw water!" She too, at least at first, does not grasp what Jesus is offering her, yet she asks.

*<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." <sup>17</sup>The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; <sup>18</sup>for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" <sup>19</sup>The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you – plural- you all - say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You worship*

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<sup>1</sup> Gench, Frances Taylor, *Back to the Well*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pg. 110.

*what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” <sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” <sup>26</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”*

Some commentators have understood the woman’s abrupt change of subject in this part of the conversation, when Jesus mentions her five husbands, as an attempt by the woman to move away from the topic of her moral character. But Jesus here does not pass judgment on the woman. This comment about the husbands is not so much to reveal something about the woman. Rather it is Jesus’ way of revealing something about himself. And the woman gets it. She declares, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.” And instead of pulling away from him she engages further.

Now that she knows what kind of person he is she asks the key theological question in her day. ‘What about this difference between our kind and yours?’ Jesus gives her an articulate, if complex, theological answer. Along the same lines of the answer he gave to Nicodemus during their conversation. This place of worship does not really matter. ‘The hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.’

The woman’s response here indicates that she has heard the promise in Jesus’ words, but does not yet see that it is being fulfilled right in front of her. She says, “I know that Messiah is coming...” And then we hear from Jesus the first of the ‘I am...’ statements in the Gospel of John. “I am he”. This to a Samaritan woman.

*<sup>27</sup>Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” <sup>28</sup>Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup>**“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”** <sup>30</sup>They left the city and were on their way to him.*

That little detail about the abandoned water jar is an intriguing.<sup>2</sup> Did the woman leave it there because she was in such a hurry to go and tell her story? Maybe she has no more need for it since now she has the living water, *or as Taylor-Gench points out in her book, maybe now the woman herself is the vessel for the gospel.* Or maybe this is to remind us of the story of the disciples when they left their nets to follow him. Or maybe it is simply meant to remind us that she is coming back. The story is not yet over.

It is important to note two things in this part of the story. First, the woman goes and bears witness. We hear nothing like this about Nicodemus. And second, the words of her witness are tentative. “He can not be the Messiah, can he?” Her witness is not yet mature, but she does it none the less. And it is effective. And for me it is a powerful point of this story. We do not have to have it all figured out in order to be effective messengers of God’s good news. *We do not have to have it all figured out in order to be effective messengers of God’s good news.*

*<sup>31</sup>Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” <sup>32</sup>But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” <sup>33</sup>So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” <sup>34</sup>Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. <sup>35</sup>Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. <sup>36</sup>The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. <sup>37</sup>For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ <sup>38</sup>I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”*

Now here the story shifts a bit and we are with the disciples. Now Jesus uses the images of food and harvest to teach. The disciples want to feed Jesus. He declares that he is sustained by the work he does, by his call. “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.” Many commentators view the discussion of the fields ripe for harvesting as an appropriate image as the disciples look up and see a whole town coming out to meet them. “I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.” Could this last verse, spoken to the disciples, be a reverence to the woman and her evangelism?

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<sup>2</sup> Gench, Frances Taylor, *Back to the Well*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pg. 118.

*<sup>39</sup>Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." <sup>40</sup>So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup>And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup>They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."*

I love this story. It is long, but so powerful. Thank you Judy, Bob and Irene.

What now? What is the Good News of this story for us today? There are many possibilities. For me today this is a story of the vastness of God's love and the way in which God uses each one of us to share the good news of that love. Education, status, nationality, being born in the right place to the right parents, having things all figured out - *none* of it matters to God. In Jesus we see the vastness of God's love. In this story we see how God will use each one of us to be messengers of that love. Bearers of that living water, just as we are.

This is indeed good news.

Who knows, maybe you will be the next one to go out and share the Good News of Jesus Christ alive here and now, in your own unique way. The next one to say, 'come and see.'