



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 3 (A)

A Remarkable Encounter

[RCL] Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42

O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

O come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Could he perhaps be the Messiah?

The gospels, as we know, contain the good news, the stories of the life and words of Jesus, as told by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The reading we have heard today, the story of the Samaritan Woman or the Woman at the Well from John's gospel, is a description of an extraordinary meeting, a moment in the life of Jesus. In fact, this passage contains the longest conversation with Jesus recorded in the Bible. It is extraordinary that this conversation occurs with a woman, a tired Samaritan woman, drawing water at the well in the heat of the day.

John has included a travel narrative in the drama of Jesus' ministry. Jesus and his disciples are making a long journey on foot, walking from Jerusalem to Galilee, opting to take the shorter route through Samaria. The climate of the region is arid, hot, dusty, and barren. When the travelers stop at midday, they are tired, hungry, and especially, thirsty. The disciples go into the city to buy food, while Jesus waits by the famous Well of Jacob. A woman approaches with her water jar, probably keeping herself modestly apart from the Jewish rabbi. Normally they would not speak to one another. But Jesus is thirsty, and he is known for not necessarily behaving or speaking within the cultural norms. He asks for a drink. While she responds with surprise that he would speak to her, the tired woman at the well turns out to be a smart, witty, feisty conversationalist.

Jesus and the woman engage in spiritual dialogue that is both profound and earthy, metaphoric and literal. "I can give you living water," he says. Taking living water in its literal sense as spring water, she responds. "How? You have no bucket; the well is deep." Jesus replies with poetry: "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty." Her comeback is spirited, spunky, and somewhat sarcastic: "Sir, give me this water so I don't have to keep coming here to draw water." The tone of the conversation is almost bantering until Jesus sets the trap. "Go, call your husband." And when she says, "I have no husband," and he counters, "You have had five husbands," the woman responds, "Sir, I see you are a

prophet,” and engages him in discussion of worship. “I know the Messiah is coming,” she says with confidence. Again, Jesus brings her up short. “I am he, I am the Messiah,” he declares.

Jesus’ purpose is to reveal to Jew and Gentile, and John’s purpose is to convince his readers, that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, that all who believe in him with never thirst, and indeed will have everlasting life. The Samaritan woman realizes that she has had an experience of God there at the well. In her awe and haste, she leaves her water jar behind. She gathers her neighbors – “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” – and many come to believe that Jesus is truly the savior of the world.

Most traditional commentary on the story of this remarkable encounter focuses on the woman’s five husbands, and the one she has now who is not her husband. Five husbands and not married to her current partner. She must be an adulterer. She is at the well alone at noon, according to this line of thinking, because she is shunned by the other women, who come together to the well in the cool of the morning. In this interpretation, Jesus exposes her lie, but he shows his compassion, saving the soul of an outsider, a marginalized woman, a sinner.

There are other possibilities. We have seen that the Samaritan woman is quick-witted, confident, and able to discuss her cultural history. There is nothing in the story that indicates adultery. It is not impossible, in those times, that she could be widowed multiple times. A widow would need to be sheltered in a man’s household. The one who is not her husband could be a brother, a cousin, or her husband’s brother.

But what about the time of day? In the previous chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus had a conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a doubter. Unlike Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, in the darkness of disbelief, the Samaritan woman is a striking example of a faithful woman. What if she comes at noon – in daylight – because daylight signifies faith? Jesus sees her – “You’ve had five husbands” – and she in turn sees him for what he is, prophet and Messiah.

Having had this theophany, this revelatory experience of God, the Samaritan woman goes on to become an enthusiastic evangelist, a witness to the transforming power of faith. She uses her voice and her experience to gather more believers to Jesus. “Come and see,” she says to the people of the city. While at first they are convinced because of her testimony, she invites them to experience Jesus for themselves.

It can be no accident that John chooses the Samaritan woman as the protagonist in the longest recorded conversation with Jesus. The Samaritan woman is a dynamic character, energized by her meeting with a stranger at the well at midday. In the passage from Romans, Paul writes of suffering that produces endurance, endurance that produces character, and character that produces hope. By her faith, her willingness to engage in spiritual dialogue and to believe in the abundant life that Jesus offers her, the woman at the well emerges from the image of thirsty, careworn outcast to hopeful evangelist. As Paul affirms, “Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:5).

The Samaritan woman's importance reaches deeper than that of a saved sinner. She is a shining example of faith, of spiritual questioning and dialogue, of experiencing the powerful presence of God. She is a voice of evangelism and witness. She might join the ranks of other faithful women who speak in the New Testament: Elizabeth, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and Lydia of Philippi. With her intellect and discernment, the Samaritan woman might join the ranks of women leaders of the church.

Let us pray: Gracious God, help us to be faithful witnesses to your transforming love. Help us to be bearers of hope. Help us to drink of the living water, the water that always quenches our thirst. May our spirits be filled with a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. Amen.

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