

3rd Sunday of Lent  
Sermon 3.8.26

**John 4:5-42**

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 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.) 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 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." 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."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 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." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

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?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 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. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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.” (775)

When I was newly a mother, Tobias just born, and we were just beginning nursing, (my husband) Jesse would read to me. I would sit in the club chair we had in our little house, one of the two pieces of upholstered furniture to fit. Jesse would sit on the floor at my feet, his knees up and the book in the crook his legs made. Tobias would be swaddled and suckling—

and please understand how very much this hurt. Nursing is something you become used to but the first little while at it—the first few days, the first week—it hurts a lot. Or it did me.

In all other ways it was going well. My milk came down after that early time of worry that it won't. Tobias attached well. And I had time with him, four weeks off from work, as did Jesse, likely two weeks, though I can't quite remember. So I wanted to stay with it. I wanted to endure the pain until it wasn't even present anymore, which I imagined would happen.

It did.

In the meantime, Jesse would read to me, and I would stare out the little window over the sofa across the tiny room and endure. I would have no idea what he was reading, had no capacity for following along. Sitting there, sucking my own lips dry, I'd just stare out the window while the words went along. It was the sound of his voice reading: it was soothing to me.

The human voice, given one to another in word.

This is the longest encounter Jesus is remembered to have shared with anyone according to the Bible. Forty-two verses long, the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well is the longest conversation he would share with anyone. It follows the encounter we heard of last week, Nicodemus the Pharisee, who came to Jesus by night, which was short, like most of them, this one but nine verses.

There are other points of contrast between these two encounters back-to-back. Nicodemus is named, but this woman at the well isn't. Nicodemus is given a title, a Pharisee, whereas this woman has revealed about her only her stigma, that she's been married many times. This means she's suffered some abuse, either at the hand of her husbands who abandon her, or at the hands of life as she is widowed, and in any event by social norms who pin the stigma on her. It is she who will have to walk around the village bearing the shame. It is she who will have to go to the village well at noon, in the heat of the day, because no one else will be there then.

And yet, so she goes, able to hold her own.

Which is another contrast to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was, it seems, anxious and confounded, confused and discouraged by the strange things Jesus had to say—that it wasn't straightforward, that it wasn't entirely clear what was required of Nicodemus. It was so unclear, in fact, that he seemed more confused *after* the encounter with Jesus than before, less clear even about what he was asking after. Why had he gone to Jesus? What had he meant to ask?

As for this woman, she seems, if not to have come to clarity about it all, nevertheless to have trusted in the mystery of such an encounter. Nothing Jesus said to her makes much sense on a literal level. Even for us, knowing what we know as we read this encounter set in the context of our larger faith, it hardly makes sense, each response one to the other hardly lining up. What she says: his response seems a *non sequitur*. What he says: she asks a question she doesn't seem frustrated not to have answered.

And I could spend this, my time of speaking, explaining it. In fact, I have in the past in my sermons on this story explained it, moving through the coded speech to some sense of meaning. But this sort of preaching, which boils down to mere scriptural commentary, isn't interesting. More to the point, it doesn't serve this encounter well because their conversation wasn't about getting to the facts, it was about plumbing some greater depth, the depth indeed as of a well. Something of evocation. Something of poetry: the Living Water and the Living Word.

The contrast between Jesus' parry with Nicodemus and that with the woman at the well is as when a strong tennis player parries with someone new to the sport and then with someone equally strong. The two more equal in skill and strength can go back and forth for a lot longer.

You could argue that these contrasts are coincidence, not something we should make too much of. As an English major in college, I remember the students who were in those classes with me because of some random requirement they had to fulfill and who tended to think us English majors were geeking out too much,

making way too much of nothing. “Do we really think Emily Dickensen meant all that with this tiny poem?” “Yes!” “Do we really think Ralph Ellison meant all that in not naming his main character?” “Yes!”

No surprise, then, that I’d argue we couldn’t possibly make too much of what our writer is doing as a writer. The Gospel of John is one of the more crafted gospel narratives, presented as a piece of literature with its own internal coherence, and indeed presented to a specific body of believers. The Johannine community was a discrete gathering of believers within the larger context of the early church. These were people who’d been driven from their homes and villages, their synagogues and families because of their belief in Jesus.

And who can blame those of the homes and villages? After all, these Jesus-believers had disrupted the settled way of things. With their new confession, this new direction they insisted to take with their old, old faith, they ushered in not just a notional difference hard to tolerate, but also political and existential consequences to worry about. Rome would notice when the Jews were in turmoil—and they would crack down hard. These new Jesus-followers in their midst put a target on the whole nation—which Rome wouldn’t hesitate to take aim at. The settled way of things was really just everyone holding their breath, violence held at bay while everyone anxiously hoped no one else would make the first move—

which would become unsettled at the merest strike

and then the violence would start again.

Judea couldn’t have that.

These people had to go.

The Johannine community, I always think, was like the gay community in the 1970s and 80s, individuals who’d come out of the closet only to be kicked out of their homes, who then found each other and created chosen families and went about living their lives if under circumstances they’d not have wanted.

It was for such a discrete community of believers that this gospel narrative was written, a whole world made in this one grand book, whose beginning is the beginning of time and creation, and whose end is the creation now made complete in the self-emptying of God for the fullness of the world, all made accomplished at the cross of Christ who, upon being lifted up on it, declares, "It is finished." As in, the world is complete. The creation has been made perfect. All has been healed, redeemed, all sin worked out like wrinkles from a cloth or air pocks in clay, worked out by the power of divine love.

This faith in creation's completion and perfect wholeness: the Gospel of John communicates this not simply by words whose one-to-one content speaks to such things, but also by words used more evocatively, more poetically. Our writer is truly up to something here, understanding the power of words and their being strung together to signify more than just plain meaning, far more so to evoke, to manifest, to create. The form they take together, the repetition of certain phrases: our writer meant for the reader to *notice*, if not consciously than at least through the effect they had. The way a cloudy day can dampen your mood, or a sunny day *these days*, can make you feel like a teenager again (if you're not currently one and you don't fully remember that being a teenager wasn't all that easy either).

All of which this character also seemed to *get*. The so-called woman at the well didn't get too hung up on whether what Jesus had to say to her made much plain sense. She seems more open to simply having the exchange, this time together to have this encounter. As if the meaning is in the time spent. As if the meaning is not simply about words said but the experience of having them said, the attention paid back and forth in the saying of them, in the exchange.

There's a common response clergy hear following a memorial service or funeral. We all hear this at some point. Family members of the beloved deceased will tell the clergy person how wonderful the service was, how perfect the words spoken were. And you learn not to take it personally, not to think too highly of

yourself. *You* haven't done anything exceptional. You haven't managed perfection where lesser preachers would fail. It has nothing to do with what you managed, in your soaring creativity and insight, to say. It's simply that you *said something*, you named the person, you presented yourself and spoke into the void that the beloved deceased left painfully behind. Simply to speak, to name, to present: this is the gift offered and received. To sustain the weary with a word, as the prophet said.

It's possible this woman lived in such a void. It's possible she spent her every day in such an absence that to be joined, to be given this presence: it's possible she understood much, most, all of what Jesus was suggesting here. It's also possible she didn't, that her power in this encounter between two near equals lay less in her perception than her reception—

which though would create of her the gospel's first preacher. According to John, this unnamed woman would be the first not merely to be transformed in new hope, as each of the disciples were, but to transform others. By her testimony, many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus as the way to life.

Not insignificantly, her witness begins with the pregnant phrase so beloved of this gospel writer: "Come and see!" By this phrase, the earliest disciples turned from following other teachings to following Jesus, and by this phrase now many in Samaria would come to him and would ask to stay with him, which indeed is to abide in him and have him abide in them. For two days he would stay, the story tells us—

—on which third day we know what happens or, if you don't know, come back on Easter to hear all about it. Resurrection morning, life abundant now and forever.

John's gospel, this most literary piece of gospel testimony, soars with the heights and grandeur of the Holy Spirit. Yet the means of this Spirit are notably intimate, notably small, one-to-one.

This is most obvious in John's telling of the Spirit's arrival on earth.

Jesus has been crucified to death and has risen again to life, and it is at dusk on that first day when he returns to the gathered disciples.

He comes into the upper room where they're hidden, comes in though the door is locked shut.

He greets them gathered there and then he breathes on them one-by-one and he says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Consider how this is remembered in the Gospel of Luke, where the Holy Spirit arrives as an unmistakable storm of wind and fire. This arrival, this new presence: it is here quiet, intimate, small in scale, nearly nothing.

I don't mind that so much.

I mean, I can relate. I believe in small things. I trust in small things more than I do in massive things. I'll take a tiny church over a megachurch anyday.

And that's not just cope talking, as the kids call it these days. I'm not just coping with my parochial life, living in this dinky town, serving all these dinky churches, and swearing that, no, this is what I *meant* my life to look like. I actually trust that here, in small rooms like this one, transformation is not only possible but has abiding power. What we encounter in rooms like this one, in gatherings like this one, has the great likelihood of staying with us, abiding with us, and making us better—more resilient, more filled with hope, and more likely to be vessels for such things unto the world.

Which is what I had to say today, words given to me that I might give them to you in the hope that they sustain amidst a world that assails. It's not going to let up. We're in a bad way. But that we are here there is hope.

Thanks be to God.