

Lent 3A 2017, John 4:5-42, March 19, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Today's lengthy reading from John's gospel will be followed over the next two Sundays by two more equally long readings. It's the only time preachers like me invite you to sit down for a gospel reading. These three Sunday readings go together. They center on the reactions of people who encounter Jesus. In today's gospel the woman at the well comes to see Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Next week a blind man blind healed by Jesus sees him as the Son of Man. And then, in the third week, Mary, the brother of Lazarus whom Jesus raises from the dead, comes to believe Jesus is the Son of God. The stories are about seeing and believing and identifying Jesus by three important titles: the Messiah, the Son of Man and Son of God. These titles identify Jesus before he undertakes his journey to the cross. There, on the cross as John says, the Son of Man shall be lifted up above the earth and draw all people to himself. During this season of Lent we journey with our Lord to those events that draw us, and all others, to the love and mercy of God.

The longest conversation Jesus has with another person recorded in the Bible is this encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. So important to the story of Jesus it was included as the theme of one of our stained glass windows here in this sanctuary. The outline and tensions of the story are familiar to us, but are still worth reviewing. It takes place in Samaria, a region that lies between Jerusalem and Galilee to the north. Samaritans and Jews are ethnically and religiously related but differ drastically in the details of their religion. The closest modern day analogy might be Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants living in Ireland. Jews believe God lives in the temple Jerusalem. Samaritans believe God is to be worshipped rightly at Mount Gerizim located of course in Samaria. Neither group regards the other as right; and both regard the other as unclean. So right from the very outset of the story it's remarkable that Jesus, a Jew, would even lower himself to speak to a Samaritan. But of course, there's more. Jesus is a rabbi. Under no circumstances would a rabbi ever speak with women while they are alone. To do so would invite shame and provoke scandal. His own disciples register shock and surprise when they come back and find he's talking openly with her. At every moment in this story something could go wrong and Jesus, or the woman, or quite possibly both, open themselves to criticism and ostracism by others.

But that's the remarkable thing about this story. Over and over again we see Jesus willing to take those risks, to go against conventional wisdom, to break through the barriers and the walls and the customs of the day in order to reach out to those who hunger and thirst for truth and beauty and freedom.

The central image Jesus uses is a living water that wells up to eternal life. This woman comes to the communal town well to gather her daily water. Water for cooking. Water for cleaning. Water for bathing. Each day she needs to come back for the day's supply of water. Each day every one of us needs water. Without clean potable water we could not live long. But the water Jesus says he brings is living water.

If we have a hard time imaging what living water might be, we can certainly imagine water that is not alive. Dead water we might call it. Dead water is persisting in the same dead end attitudes and the same stifling prejudices just because it's too hard to make a change. Dead water is nurturing that little habit day after day even though it's killing you spiritually inside. Dead water is that water you give yourself but once you've had it you're just as thirsty as before.

Jesus comes to bring living water. This is the water of fresh starts and new beginnings. It's the water if putting aside old tired habits and ways of thinking and getting in tune with the

graces and gifts of God in your life. That's the living water of Jesus and he means for everybody to drink from the well which is his life and love.

The woman experiences a life-change when she encounters Jesus at the well. Her life was going along in a direction God didn't mean for it to go. Something was wrong. She had five husbands and was currently living with her boyfriend. We don't know the circumstances of so many marriages. Maybe it was divorce, maybe the death of those she loved, maybe she was abused and then abandoned, maybe she made poor choices. Was she grieving? Had life dealt her so many knocks that she was simply numbed to the many changes in her life? We don't know. The story doesn't tell us. Another little detail sheds might shed a bit of light. She was at the well at noon. Why does this matter? It was the wrong time of day to be there. Everyone else in the village gathers at the well in the cool of the morning or the in the shade of evening. Remember it's a communal well. It's the town gathering place. The center for conversation, sharing the news of the day, socializing with your neighbors. This woman comes at noon. Alone. It seems likely she was being shunned by the rest of her community. Her solitude suggests a very lonely existence. Which makes it all the more remarkable that Jesus would stop and take the time to speak with her.

At first she seems defensive of her status and position. His knowing her situation makes him a kind of prophet in her eyes. Yet Jesus isn't interested in debating the priorities of Jews over Samaritans or the finer theological points of the proper place and time and liturgy for the proper worship of God. There's something new happening Jesus says. God is breaking out of the narrow confines of Temple and mountain top. God is breaking down the barriers between Jew and Samaritan. True worshippers of God are going to stand side by side, no class distinction, no wall of separation built between men and women. "All of that is going to happen when the Messiah comes, he'll show us everything," she seems to say. "I am he," Jesus says.

And here is where we get to the truly remarkable part of this story. She runs back to her village, to the very people who ostracize her, and she tells them about this man using the very words and attitudes they use against her. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" This woman is a witness to Jesus. Not a likely witness. She still has questions "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" she asks. Even so, her witness is enough; it's invitational and not judgmental. She bases her witness and invitation on her own experience. It's honest even with its own uncertainty.

The Samaritan woman serves as a remarkable and important model for the church in our witness to the world. An unlikely and unexpected person becomes the very one who speaks of the life-changing encounter with the Messiah. John the evangelist tell us that many "believed in him because the woman's testimony." But that's a very weak translation. John really tells us she spoke, "the Word." The same Word with which he begins his gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Jesus is the Word. God's own gracious speech deep in humanity. The Samaritan woman is as important, as authentic a witness to Jesus as any other in the Bible.

The Messiah breaks down all barriers, smashes all the walls we build, crosses over all borders that divide us. At the cross all people are drawn together into a common humanity, joined to the one who is the Word made human. In Jesus the living water wells up to refresh, restore and renew all who are thirsty for true and authentic life. Thanks be to God for witnesses such as the Samaritan woman who points the way the well. Amen.