

Scripture: 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. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ 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.) ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ 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. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷ 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?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him. ³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." ³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² 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."

Prayer: All-knowing and all-caring God, we gather this day drained by a difficult week full of unknown places and uncharted waters. We are like a parched desert, empty and in need of replenishment. Visit us with your presence, saturate us with your Spirit, and bathe us in your streams of living water as we hear your Word, so that our lives might acknowledge and worship you to the praise and honor of Jesus Christ. **Amen!**

Sermon: Wilderness Wanderings: Into the Unknown

If you've been following along on our wilderness journey this Lent, you might recall that last week we met a man named Nicodemus. Now, Nicodemus was an educated man, a Pharisee in fact...meaning he was the religious elite of the day, the one who was supposed to know everything about the Scriptures and the coming Messiah. But despite his status and supposed knowledge, Nicodemus wanted to have a conversation with Jesus because he had some questions. And so, he scheduled a meeting, he sought an opportunity to meet Jesus and get some answers. And this meeting eventually happened in the middle of the night because Nicodemus didn't want others to know he was talking to Jesus because he was afraid of what they might think.

Today, as we turn the page in the Gospel of John, we meet a different character, a woman this time. A woman who doesn't even get a name but who has come to be known simply as the woman at the well.

Basically, this woman is a nobody...defined only by her gender, religious orientation, social standing and personal habits.

And if being a nobody wasn't enough, this woman at the well is also a complete outsider...you might even consider her to be a triple outsider.

She's a Samaritan, which made her a half-breed and pagan as far as the Jews of the day were concerned.

She's a woman and women of Jesus' time didn't have any standing in society and definitely no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially not by holy and religious men.

And she is what one might call a fallen, disgraced or shameful woman...the respectable woman of her time made their trips to the well to gather water in the morning, when it was cool. It was a sort of social time, where they could greet one another and talk about the news...and maybe even gossip a little. But the woman of our story showed up at noon in an attempt to avoid that morning social hour, perhaps because she was the subject of their gossip.

In other words, Nicodemus and the woman at the well couldn't be more different. Nicodemus is an educated man, a teacher of Israel; she is uneducated. Nicodemus is a Jew; she is a Samaritan. Nicodemus is a respected moral leader; she has a shameful past. Nicodemus meets Jesus with intention; she just happens to run into Jesus at the well. Nicodemus meets Jesus at midnight; she meets Jesus at noontime.

But, despite who this woman was, or wasn't, Jesus has a longer and more direct conversation with her than any other character in all of the Gospels. It's a longer conversation than he has with his disciples at any one time. Longer than his conversation with Nicodemus. It's longer than he talks to his accusers. Longer even than he talks to his own family.

For being an unnamed outsider, this woman is a key character in the Gospel story.

And it doesn't make sense. Talking to this woman isn't going to make Jesus particularly popular among the Jewish leaders. It's not exactly that greatest marketing strategy ever developed.

So, you can imagine the surprise of this woman when, at the heat of the day, she arrives to the well, with her water bucket balanced on her head, and sees a strange man sitting beside the well.

Now, he could be anyone and it probably wasn't the first time she encountered a stranger at the well in the middle of the day. After all, it probably wasn't uncommon for people to stop at a well to get water along their journey. But this time, as the woman approached to draw water, the man said to her, "Give me a drink" (John 4:7).

Based on her response, there was something about this man that made it clear to her that he was a Jew. Because she responds, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4:9).

In her view, it makes no sense for this man, a Jew, to be talking to her, much less asking her for water...not only was she a nobody, but also because the Jews had endless rules about such things. Just think about the laws concerning what they could eat and what they could drink, much less who they could interact with and touch. And if this Jewish man were to drink from her bucket, he would be breaking the law and would risk becoming unclean under the eyes of the law and religious authority.

But none of that stops Jesus from continuing a conversation with her.

Jesus begins, "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" (John 4:10)

And the woman responds, "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?" (John 4:11-12).

And then Jesus responds, "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" (John 4:13-14)

And the woman responds, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (John 4:15).

It's a strange conversation, and just like with Nicodemus last week, up to this point, it's not actually clear whether they actually understand each other.

But then, there comes a rather abrupt change of subject. The woman has just asked for the water of which Jesus speaks. And Jesus responds, "Go, call your husband, and come back" (John 4:16)

Whatever the woman thought Jesus was talking about, the shift from water to her husband is rather strange. Suddenly the conversation became quite personal.

And the woman looks straight at Jesus and says clear and simple, "I have no husband."

It's a true statement, but really just a small glimpse into her world, but then Jesus tells her the rest of the truth about herself. A truth she knows all too well and tries to avoid day in and day out by coming to get water from the well at noon, instead of with the other woman in the morning.

Because of her truth, this woman lives a sort of spiritual wilderness. We don't know if she entered this wilderness by her own choice or because of the choices of others. But it's a wilderness nevertheless where she likely feels isolated and alone. And now, here she is before a complete stranger fully exposed for who she really is, the good, the bad and the ugly.

And so, in some sense, this moment before Jesus is vulnerable and terrifying. This man standing in front of her suddenly seems to know everything there is to know about her. It's as if he has x-ray eyes seeing into her entire life and being.

And yet, Jesus doesn't pull away from her. Jesus doesn't walk away from her, writing her off as just another nobody, unworthy of his time and attention. Instead Jesus stays right there with her in the middle of the vulnerability and exposure. He stays with her in the pain and hurt. He enters her wilderness.

And then, all the sudden, it is simply too much for the woman and she changes the subject back to religion saying, "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" (John 4:19-20).

Truthfully, I don't blame her for trying to change the subject. If he knows she's had multiple husbands, there's no telling what else he knows about her and she would probably rather not find out. Going back to a conversation about religion, while still a strange conversation for a Jew and a Samaritan, perhaps is a sort of protective measure for this woman. It's her way of trying to cover herself up, to reduce her exposure, to not feel so broken, vulnerable and exposed in front of this complete stranger.

But the woman's attempt to step back and change the subject doesn't work. Because when she steps back, Jesus takes another step toward her. When she tries to disappear into anonymity and darkness, Jesus returns with her into the light. Jesus will not let the woman retreat and hide. He will not let her stay in her wilderness alone.

Instead, Jesus is determined to show himself to her, to reveal to this Samaritan woman everything there is to know about himself too

Because when the woman says, “I know that the Messiah is coming” (John 4:25), Jesus responds, “I am he” (John 4:26).

It’s the first time Jesus himself has made such a declaration to another living soul. It is a moment of full disclosure, in which the outsider and the Messiah himself stand face to face with another knowing all there is to know about the other. They stand before one another for one moment in time while all the rules, taboos and history that separate them fall forgotten to the ground.

By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who he is too. By confirming her true identity, painful as it might be, Jesus reveals his own identity, and the power that his identity holds to change her life.

Because the Messiah will break all the rules; the Messiah is for all people, regardless of gender, ethnicity and history; and the Messiah can see all that you are and love you still.

And the Messiah who stood alongside the woman at the well that day, is the same Messiah who stands with us today, wherever we find ourselves.

For Jesus, the Messiah, is the one in whose presence you are exposed for who you really are – the good and bad and everything in between. And as vulnerable as that may feel, the promise of the Gospel is that the Messiah will never back down or back away.

Instead, the Messiah is the one who will cross every boundary, break every rule, and drop every disguise, and enter every wilderness to show you who he is...the Savior of the world who loves every outcast, downtrodden, overlooked, outsider just as much as he loves the popular, educated, well-regarded people of the world.

Because there is no wilderness, whether physical or spiritual that is too threatening or too dangerous or too unknown or too painful for the love of God. There is no person or place that is beyond the reach of the love of God.

And then, out of the wilderness, the Messiah is the one who invites all people to gather at one table. To feast with one another. For there is always room at the table, no matter who you are or where you’ve come from! And in this moment in the Gospel of John, Jesus had just invited a new, unlikely and unexpected character, to join the feast.

And then, in perhaps the greatest twist of the story, the woman drops everything, turns around and runs back to her city announcing to the world, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done” (John 4:29).

She goes with joy instead of fear to face the very people who she was trying to avoid in the first place. Because she has experienced the deep love and great revelation of Jesus, she boldly proclaims to all, even those she thought she could never face again, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.”

And in my imagination, she finishes that sentence with the words that are oh so true but remain unspoken, “and he loved me anyways.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.