

Lent 3A 2023  
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; John 4:5-42  
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Last week, in the story of Nicodemus, we talked about the misunderstandings that occurred. This morning we also hear misunderstandings when the Samaritan woman, and then Jesus own disciples, initially miss the good news because they are too focused on the stories they think they are in.

The Samaritan woman thinks she is in a romance novel. In ancient times, wells were places where matches were made. Abraham's servant found Rebecca, who would marry Isaac, at a well, and Jacob met his wife Rachel at one. When we are reminded of Jacob in the first sentence this morning, and then Jesus stops at a well when mysterious, foreign woman shows up, an early reader of the gospel might expect things to get interesting. And they do.

The Samaritan woman comes to the well at noon, the hottest part of the day. No one would willingly go a well in the desert at that time, so this woman probably wasn't able to go in the morning with the other women. We can imagine at least five or six of them didn't really like her. Jesus asks her for a drink, which both engages her and subverts expectations. Jacob, for instance, didn't ask for a drink. He drew water for Rachel and all her sheep. The Samaritan woman asks how a Jewish man asks her for a drink. We know Jesus is breaking down barriers, but the woman takes this as an opportunity for flirtatious inquiry – Is this Jewish boy willing to make a match with a Samaritan like me? Jesus' answer is an amazing revelation of who he is, but we can also imagine John Travolta from Greece saying these lines to a totally different effect: "If you knew the gift of God...you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The Samaritan woman responds to this interpretation. With a very rich irony, the Samaritan woman offers an incredible truth while intending to say something very different. "So Mr.-Gift-of-God, are you greater than Jacob who gave us this well?" We know he is. Jesus replies that drinking this water will make you thirsty again, but I'll give you water gushing up in you to eternal life. The Samaritan tells Jesus, in effect, to put up or shut up, asking for this water of life, but for the wrong reasons. "Sir, give me this water so I [don't have to keep coming here and doing all this work] to draw water."

The Samaritan woman might be giving up, but then Jesus tells her to go get her husband. We know that Jesus is setting up something important, but she hears, "He wants to know if I'm single." "I have no husband." Jesus replies, "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." With that, the Samaritan woman changes the subject. She's not yet sure what this conversation is, but if it's still a romance, it doesn't look like there will be a happy ending.

She says, "I see you are a prophet," and she steers the subject back to Jewish-Samaritan relations. After a response where Jesus maintains his own tradition and opens up a future where all can worship together in Spirit and in truth, the Samaritan says she is waiting for the Messiah. Jesus says, "I am he."

At that moment, Jesus' disciples return. They also read this story as a romance, and are scandalized that their teacher is talking to a woman. When they arrive, the Samaritan woman goes back home and starts telling people that she's met someone who told her everything she'd ever done, and that he could be the Messiah. We'll come back to her in a minute.

Once the woman leaves the disciples go back to their own story, which is a travelogue, not a romance. They want to have lunch so they can move through this foreign area. They don't want to be at a well at noon either. They went and got some food, and now they want Jesus to eat. Jesus is trying to teach them about the gospel story by saying that he has food, but they don't know it. His food is to do the will of God, which involves harvesting the fields that are ripe. Instead of worrying about lunch, the disciples need to look around at what God has prepared for them, and do the work. They don't even have to do all the jobs – they just need to do the job God has given them, which at that moment is harvesting. Jesus is pointing out that this Samaritan city is ready to live into the good news of his eternal salvation, but the disciples don't understand.

The city shows up, however. And the reason they show up is that the Samaritan woman has been transformed herself. What mattered here is not that Jesus knew about her five-and-a-half husbands. Everybody knew about that. What mattered was that Jesus knew her whole life and still loved her enough to share the good news of eternal life with her, and she decided to accept that gift from the Messiah. People knew immediately that her story had changed and she had changed, and they wanted to know why. So they went to Jesus, heard Jesus, and changed their story to Jesus' saving story, as well.

Someone who wasn't Jesus might have done something very different. Someone could have played into the woman's romantic story. It wouldn't have been a happily ever after, but they might have gotten some water and been not-husband-number-seven for a while. Or a morally upright someone could have scorned her as a sinner the way most of her neighbors probably did. Or an observant Jewish someone could refuse to have anything to do with her for religious reasons. Or a traveling someone could have followed the disciples lead and just ignored her because they were hot and tired and didn't want to deal with anyone else.

But Jesus lived out his story of the good news of eternal salvation freely given to all. Even when the Samaritan woman or the disciples tried to pull him into another story, he knew what he was about and did what he was called to do. Jesus' activity here is important for us in a number of ways.

First, after that Magi in Bethlehem, this account is perhaps the earliest instance of the good news going beyond the Jewish people. The Samaritans believed in the God of Abraham, but had different traditions, because they stayed in the promised land instead of going into exile a few hundred years earlier. Here we see Jesus, during his life, offering salvation, through the ministry of a Samaritan woman evangelist, to another people group.

Second, we are reminded that Jesus is going to keep offering us the amazing gift that he wants to give us. We constantly try to rope Jesus into our own stories, and he refuses to allow us to settle for them. We want a pony, and he wants us to have eternal life. We want things to be easier, and he wants to give us a love that reaches the core of our being and propels us to difficult acts of

kindness and compassion we never could have imagined. We want to be a bit less anxious and he won't stop until we are surrounded by a peace beyond our understanding and an abundance beyond anything we can ask or imagine. Along the way, we might also get a pony – our heavenly Father loves his children and wants us to be happy. We won't stop receiving gifts and blessings, however, until we either turn our backs to God or we accept the fullness of the loving relationship he longs to have with us.

Third, we are surrounded by people who want us in their stories. We know that most of the problems in the world come because people had bad things happen to them, and so they repeat other bad things because that is all they know, or out of fear, or trauma, or similar things. We try to fill up any emptiness inside us with things that will not satisfy. All too often, people around us expect us to act in ways that will eventually hurt them, or ourselves, or someone else, or remain at such a distance as to prevent any real encounter or relationship. Yet those stories and actions are not true to who we are. We are children of God. We are people who have known the deep and abiding love of Jesus for us and who are called to share that love with the world. We are called to treat people, whoever they are, with God's love. God's love does not take advantage of others or make us victims somehow ourselves. God's love is an open invitation for people to leave the harmful stories they tell about themselves and join us on an adventure to the heart of God. This love and transformation will be especially powerful with people, like the Samaritan woman, whose stories would too often make them into villains. Often those most in need of experiencing the love of Jesus are also those with whom we expect to have a particularly difficult time sharing it. Yet, we know, unlike the disciples, that the fields are ripe for harvesting and we can gather the fruit.

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, many would never have guessed how the story would have played out. We would have known, however, because we know Jesus, and we know his central role the story of God's love and salvation. We are invited to live evermore deeply into that story, and to share it with others. We should. They call it the Greatest Story Ever Told with good reason.