

Year A, 3 Lent  
Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 95  
Romans 5:1-11  
John 4:5-42

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

This morning we have another reading from John's gospel about someone else who has an enlightening conversation with Jesus. Last Sunday we saw Nicodemus, meeting with Jesus in secret at midnight. Despite Nicodemus's theological education and teaching experience, he didn't, or couldn't understand what Jesus was saying. He met Jesus in the darkness of night, and he stayed in the dark, as it were. We would have expected Nicodemus to understand and accept Jesus. Today we see the Samaritan woman talking with Jesus at the well, and she meets him at midday—in the light, if you will. And in spite of her cultural difference, and her *lack* of theological education, she understands and believes in Jesus. In writing this story, John uses irony, and contrasts these two characters, Nicodemus, and the Samaritan woman, (they come one after another in the narrative) to show us that sometimes people whom we might think are “nobodies” are actually “somebody” to Jesus. In fact, the Samaritan woman becomes one of the first female evangelists for Jesus.

The story begins with Jesus sitting by a well in Samaria at noon, and a woman comes to draw water. For the hearers of this story, such a setting would echo many other important biblical stories that took place at wells: Abraham's servant and Rebekah at the well; Jacob and Rachel at the well (this is actually **that** well); Moses and the seven daughters of the Midianite priest at the well. In most well stories this situation sets up the man and a woman to marry eventually, so John's hearers might expect this, especially when Jesus and the woman talk about living water, and springs gushing up. Their language can be taken as erotic, and sexually symbolic—in other places in scripture, these water metaphors are used that way. So there is this sexual tension present that John's hearers would perceive, that we probably overlook, especially since this is the Bible.

And the banter between the two of them seems bold and familiar for people who don't know one another; the woman says, "Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob...?" She's quick-witted, brash, and not put off by Jesus's grand talk, **and** she is also paying attention enough to have pertinent questions. Something we also might not realize is that a woman who comes to the well at midday would only do that because she wasn't allowed to come with other women in the cool of early morning, or in the cool of the evening. She has to come in the heat of midday because the other women shun her for some reason. But John's readers *would* know this about her immediately, which intensifies the erotic overtones of the scene. This would serve to get everyone's attention. What's up with this woman?

Also, Jesus shouldn't even talk with a woman that he doesn't know, and certainly not with a Samaritan woman. Jewish men generally didn't address unknown women—it was not polite—and Samaritans are ritually unclean to the Jews. But not only does Jesus talk with this woman, he demands a drink from her. If he were to drink from her water jar, that would make *him* ritually unclean. They both know this.

Then we learn that this woman has been married five times, and now is living with a man who isn't her husband. It's hard to know what misfortune befell her that she was married five times. That was likely not her fault, and something over which she had very little control. But living with a man who isn't her husband is something she would have a say in, and is probably the reason that she has to come for water at midday. She is a fallen woman.

So we see that this Samaritan woman is sharp, and brazen, and a bit of an outcast in her community—not really someone that Jesus should be associating with, for a number of reasons. Remember his disciples are shocked to see him doing this. But he *chooses* to speak to her, knowing exactly who she is. And she rewards his conversation with understanding and with the trust that Nicodemus didn't give him. She tells him "I know that Messiah is coming" and he tells her, "I am he, the

one who is speaking to you.” In the Greek Jesus says “ego emi,” which in Hebrew would be exactly what the Lord said to Moses from the burning bush, when God identified Godself as “I AM.” Jesus tells this woman that he is the Messiah; he is the great I AM. Yes, he *is* greater than their ancestor Jacob, whose well he’s sitting next to.

The woman’s response to this is to leave her water jar at the well and run to tell her community that the Messiah is among them. “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.” The woman’s testimony is so compelling that people come to see and hear Jesus because of it. Of course, when they are with him, many are then convinced that he is the Messiah.

John uses this story of the Samaritan woman to show Jesus, once again, turning society’s expectations upside down. We see that an uneducated *woman* understands what an educated *man* like Nicodemus does not. That an outcast—a nobody—tells her community news that saves them. And a Samaritan—an enemy—becomes a follower of Christ, and shows us that Jesus is not just for the Jews, but is the savior of the world. If this woman can spread the Good News about Jesus, with her beginner’s faith, and all of her faults, and her complex past—maybe we can, too.

Amen.

The Rev. Melanie Lewis  
Rector, Christ Church Millwood