

“The Woman at the Well” from John 4. Preached by Pastor Jon on March 12, 2023

In 1965 Peter, Paul, and Mary made popular the song, “Jesus met the woman at the well”.

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And he told her everything she’d ever done.

I remember my first year as a Pastor in Oregon, a woman in our congregation, Susan Jordan, asked me to learn this song on the guitar and sing with her in church. All I remember is it went on and on and on. But, to this day, my older kids remember the story of the woman at the well because of that song.

The woman at the well is one of the most powerful and challenging stories in the Bible when it comes to the inclusiveness of Jesus and the church. My systematic theology professor in Seminary, Winston Persaud, said in a conversation once that this is his favorite image of God in the Bible.

It starts off with Jesus traveling from Judea and to Galilee. There were two routes to get from Judea to Galilee. One was the shortest route, which went through Samaria and the other was a circuitous route along the Mediterranean Sea... most Jewish people would take the longer route to avoid traveling through Samaria because they didn’t get along and didn’t agree on faith matters.

But not Jesus. In our Gospel today, John tells us that “Jesus had to go through Samaria”. Not for geographic reasons, but for theological reasons. This makes sense because Jesus just told Nicodemus in John 3:16 “For God so loved the world.” To fulfill that scripture Jesus needs to encounter the Samaritan people as a sign that they are included in his gift of salvation.

Samaritans were a mixed-race people, they worshipped false gods, and on the wrong mountain according to the Jews. Jews and Samaritans avoided each other at all costs. But not Jesus.

While in Samaria, Jesus stops at Jacob's well. He was thirsty and hungry, showing his human side. He sits there and waits at Noon... the hottest part of the day. The disciples went into the city to buy food. A Samaritan woman shows up to draw water and Jesus asks her for a drink.

Why was this woman coming to the well at the hottest part of the day? Tradition says that "normal" women would come to the well to draw water early in the morning or at dusk. But this woman was forced to come at noon. Noon was the hour when persons who were socially ostracized or ashamed would go to the well. Going then, she could avoid the harsh and cold treatment of the other women of the community... the gossip network.

And yet Jesus is there at noon initiating a conversation. What is Jewish man doing speaking to a Samaritan woman in public? This was a no no. This broke all kinds of social boundaries. She knew Jesus shouldn't be talking to her and reminded him of that... much less sharing the same bucket or utensils. It was unclean for a Jewish person to share utensils with a Samaritan in the law of Moses.

Jesus said, if you knew the gift of God standing in front of you, you would have asked me for a drink and I would have given you living water... like a spring of water. This piques her interest. She does not want to keep coming to the well to draw water. Jesus continues, "If you drink the water I give, you will never be thirsty. It will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." "Sir give me this water always." She is still thinking physical water at this point. But Jesus is talking about a deeper spiritual matter.

Jesus then has a conversation with her about her relationships. He says go call your husband. But Jesus knew she was living with a man who wasn't her husband. In fact she had 5 husbands. It is easy to let your mind wonder why she had 5 husbands. Did they die? Did they divorce her? If it was divorce, we know even one divorce is hard on a family and creates divisions.

But Jesus knew everything about her but didn't condemn her or dismiss her. She wanted to change the subject from her relationships to their religious differences. Jesus said, one day, we will worship together. She said she knew the Messiah was coming, and Jesus said, "I am he."

Just then the disciples returned from a trip into town to get food and saw Jesus talking to the woman. She left and went back to the city. She said to the people, "come and see a man who told me everything I've ever done. Here testimony was, I/we are accepted."

She brought others to come and see Jesus for themselves. Many believed in Jesus through the woman's testimony. Scholars believe she was the true disciple in this story, inviting others to come to Jesus.

This text challenges the church and us to think about questions like "What is your Samaria?" What areas or people do you avoid? It also begs the question, "What walls have we put up known or unknown that leave people out?"

The woman at the well obviously struggled in life. We don't know everything about her, and we truly don't even know her morals. But regardless, Jesus treated her like a human being. He gave her agency. He gave her a new life and mission. People listened to her again and welcomed her back into community. Jesus gave her living water.

This text should remind us that we too are loved no matter what your past might be... that God knows everything about you and still loves you and forgives you. And God can use you and your testimony to invite others to meet Jesus.

Finally, what does it mean to you that we have a God in flesh who consistently breaks down dividing walls between people and Nations?

Amen!