

Left Behind

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

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John 4:5-42 (Lent 3A)

4:5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

4:6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

4:7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

4:8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

4:9 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.)

4:10 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."

4:11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

4:12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

4:13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,

4:14 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."

4:15 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."

4:16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

4:17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';

4:18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

4:19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet.

4:20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

4:21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

4:22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

4:23 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.

4:24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

4:25 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."

4:26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

4:27 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?"

4:28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,

4:29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

4:30 They left the city and were on their way to him.

4:39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."

4:40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

4:41 And many more believed because of his word.

4:42 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."

Proclamation of the Word

Before our reading today, John records that Jesus is leaving Jerusalem to get to Galilee, Verse 4, John writes, "Now he had to go through Samaria." Samaria! Why would Jesus a good Jew go through Samaria? The Samaritans were the unclean. They were the Religious other. They were repulsive to faithful followers of the Great I AM, Yahweh, the Chosen People.

For some reason Jesus chose to go through Samaria. He has just encountered one of God's "Chosen People" in Nicodemus the Pharisee. Then he purposefully goes through Samaria which was where the "rejected people" live. Jews feared contamination by the Samaritans. Samaritans were hated and despised, even though they were descendants of Jacob, some of the twelve tribes of Israel who had inter-married with those who had conquered them for generations. It is here that Jesus chooses to go because the John tells us why in verse 4- He HAD TO (*edei-* Greek).¹ In John's Gospel Jesus had to because it was part of God's plan. Jesus' stop in Samaria was theological, not just geographical. And they meet at their ancestor Jacob's well.

Here at the well, Jesus meets and speaks to a Samaritan woman in broad daylight. It was unheard of, taboo. Unlike Nicodemus who came under the cover of night as a Jewish man of the establishment, she was a Nobody with No name. The two, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, are connected by some words of testimony from John which includes:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life...

Now some questions have been raised about her past because Jesus acknowledges that she has had 5 husbands. This may not be a moral failing, but evidence of a system where women were dependent on men. She may have been divorced, widowed, or simply abandoned left with no way to provide for herself. What we do know is that she is a Witness to Jesus as the Savior of the World!!! (John 4:42)

In fact she was so excited to run and tell others about Jesus that she left her water jar behind. And she says, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" She who was unseen is seen for who she truly is, a recipient of God's gracious presence.

Jesus had to go there. Jesus had to share the good news; yes, even with the Samaritans, and he begins when he himself is thirsty. He asks for her help. She, a woman, speaking to a Jewish man, encounters the Holy God of Israel. When she asks his name he says, I AM, just as her ancestors knew from Moses' encounter with God at the Burning Bush. I AM sent me. I AM the Creator of the World and all who live in it. I AM offering you living water that quenches all our thirsts and lasts forever. Jesus sees her, and his real nature is revealed to the Samaritan woman.

Because of her testimony and the fact that Jesus stayed a couple of days among them at the request of the Samaritans, many believed in Jesus. Besides John the Baptist, she is the very first witness to Jesus Christ as Savior of the World. And a very unlikely witness she was. The fact that she was the messenger probably offended and confused the disciples who were "Astonished that Jesus was speaking with a woman." (John 4:27) Later they would be shocked to hear that the one person to stop and help a wounded traveler, would be a "Good Samaritan."

Just as Jesus HAD TO go through Samaria, I have to tell you what happened Thursday. It may make some uncomfortable. You may be astonished like the disciples were. You may be offended. Or you may be shocked at how deep the well of God's grace can be or how the living water can give life and hope to a dying man. Little did I know that God was preparing this sermon through an encounter.

STORY- The call came on Wednesday. "I'd like to speak to the Pastor," the man said. So while I was out, Judy passed the call along to Rodney. The caller was a man who wanted to know that he had called a PC (USA) church. Rodney assured him that he did. He was from Los Angeles and would call back to speak to the pastor.

The second call came on Thursday morning. I had planned to spend the day preparing a sermon and being off on Friday since my family would all be home and out of school. I kept thinking about the Samaritan woman and her encounter with Jesus at the well. What did God want me to speak so that his people could hear the good news? I pondered and prayed as I got caught up on emails and messages, so I could then finally spend the whole rest of the day on my sermon. It was getting later in the morning when he called.

Mike: I'm Mike (not his real name). This is a PC (USA) church, right? Yes! I arrived in Clemson on Monday night and am trying to get home to Los Angeles. I am a member of a Presbyterian Church back home, and I have tried to call my pastors for help, but they are out of the country. You see I am sick. I have AIDS. And I want to make sure you wouldn't turn your back on me first. But since we are from the same church, I knew you were family. I am 50 years old. My partner died last year. I grew up in a family that was a part of a fundamentalist Baptist church. When my family found out about my sexuality a week before my 20th birthday, they threw me out of the house. I am getting very sick and had the crazy idea that if I went home, they might have changed some 30 years later. I thought if they saw how sick I was they would be kind. So I bought a round trip Amtrak Train ticket to Baltimore. I cannot fly because there would be too little oxygen and I have AIDS related pneumonia. On the trip out, I had a 3 week hospital stay. When I arrived they were hateful, and I was afraid for my safety. They are strong supporters of Fred Phelps and the hate he espouses along with the Westboro Baptist church. They said awful things to me like "AIDS is God's way of sending you to hell quicker." They threw me out with most of my bags, but not the one small bag with my train ticket in it. So I am trying to hitchhike back home to LA. I got a ride from someone who got me to Clemson then put me up for three nights here at the University Inn. I feel like I am in a foreign country. It is really nice and quiet though. I hate to ask for help, but a friend is having a courier bring an Amtrak ticket and my medicine today. I leave tomorrow on a shuttle to Atlanta to catch the train. I feel real awful needing to ask for help.

Me: Well, your friend wouldn't do that unless he wants to help you. So how can I help you?

Mike: I just need one more night paid for until I can get on that shuttle to Atlanta. Oh, and I am out of money for food on the way- although I throw up everything. I keep hoping I am getting enough to keep me going.

Me: Let me see what I can do. I'll call you back.

Mike: Thank you so much.

When I tell him would come meet him at the Lobby, he said, "It will be good to see some real family."

Me: Yes, Mike, the water of Baptism which makes us family, is thicker than blood.

Rodney, are you up for being a Good Samaritan?

I tell Rodney that it was nothing personal. Mike wouldn't speak to him because he doesn't know who he could trust. Rodney being a southern male would not be an ideal candidate from Mike's perspective; so the two of us go to meet Mike ready with food money on a VISA card. Rodney pays for his room for one night. And we sit and talk. He tells us his story again. And we visited for a long time. He tells us about getting disowned in 1984. How there was a small LGBT community Center in Hollywood and they found him on the street, scared and alone. "They saved my life. A few days later I

was in an apartment, had a part-time job, and was going to start school.” He tells us about joining the church just a little over a year ago. “I wish I had found them sooner. The church is my real family. We care for each other. God really works these things out. My partner of 19 years always wanted me to go to church with him. I finally found a church home in the past couple of years.

When he gets to the part where he tells Rodney about his family being Fred Phelps supporters, I share that Fred has just died that morning. If you do not know, this is the group that picketed so many American soldiers’ funerals with hate signs about homosexual people until veterans, Bikers, and college students formed human walls to protect the mourners from seeing their venomous signs. Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church, which is mostly all extended family, have even offended the Ku Klux Klan. This “church” has been called one of the vilest hate groups in the U.S. It seemed strangely ironic to me that on the day that Fred Phelps died, I met one of the victims of his hate here in Clemson, SC. When I told Mike Fred died, you should have seen his face. It was one of relief and disbelief. He said he hoped Fred was in heaven surrounded by all the gays he knew who had died!

I talked to Mike last night. He was hospitalized before he could get on that shuttle. The grace is that his Doctor in LS called a local Doctor here and arranged for transport to the Hospital. He also arranged for a nurse to accompany Mike home on the Monday train. I told him that I promised to pray for his daily until I know he is home. He said, “God just has a way of working these things out.”

Our Samaritan woman reminds me of Mike. One who was rejected and despised, cast out and broken, wounded and scarred, by those in his own family and one branch of the established church. Both found grace and living water because they met Jesus both personally and through those who embody him, the church.

So glad to find salvation, they left their water jars behind and ran to tell others about Jesus.

Which makes me wonder, what do we need to leave behind that prevents us from going and telling others of God’s living water and amazing grace offered and received?

Is it our fear, phobia, and prejudice?

Is it our lack of belief in our own worth and value?

Is it our greed and selfishness?

In this season of Lent and repentance, which literally means “a turning around,” what water jar will you leave behind, so that you might run and witness to God’s redeeming grace?

How deep is the well of God’s grace and how refreshing is the Living Water Jesus offers us.

¹ Gail R. O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 565.