

The Woman at the Well

The last few weeks we've seen Jesus change water to wine at a wedding in Cana. We followed him to Jerusalem and watched him cause a ruckus at the Temple. Last week, the Pharisee, Nicodemus, came to see Jesus under cover of night.

Now, Jesus is headed back to Galilee. We're going to begin our conversation with a closer look at verse 4 – he had to go through Samaria.

Take your bulletin and take a look at the map on the front. Jesus did not in fact have to go through Samaria. Most Jews didn't – they took that alternate route specifically to avoid Samaria. The Samaritans and Jews despised each other. The Samaritans were considered at best unclean by the Jews. They were a mixed race and they worshiped multiple gods.

What the Jews usually did is similar to what people do when they believe they should avoid certain neighborhoods like those in north Omaha or south Chicago – they take a route that goes around it. People worry about being in the so-called bad neighborhoods, even though an awful lot of ordinary people live there.

Samaria was a bad neighborhood in the eyes of the Jewish people.

So, no, geographically speaking Jesus did not have to go through Samaria.

Often, when Bible stories say "it was necessary for him to..." fill in the blank, it's what we call a divine imperative. It's an imperative that means not that God forces something, but that it is something that has to happen for God's mission to be carried forward.

Jesus had to go through Samaria for a reason that had to do with his mission. And what might that be? This...this encounter with this woman.

This story is meant to be read alongside the story of Nicodemus. Of all the people, Nicodemus should have been the obvious model disciple. He was Jewish...a devoted Pharisee – and I mean that in a good way, one really dedicated to living as God wants. If anyone should have been walking in the light, it was him.

But he came to Jesus under the cover of darkness. And he didn't quite get what Jesus tried to say. Nicodemus will show up again – he continued to live on the fringes of being a disciple – until the very end when he brought myrrh and aloe to anoint Jesus' body and help bury him.

In John's typical symbolic fashion, by contrast, this Samaritan woman meets Jesus in the brightest part of the day.

And she is not someone who would have been an obvious choice for disciple.

First of all, she's Samaritan. I've already talked about what that all entailed. And she's a woman. Then there's this business of her being married five times.

The church has done her a major disservice by casting her as a loose woman.... sort of like the church did with Mary Magdalene. But there's nothing in the actual story to support that.

We don't know why she's been married five times...she could have been widowed five times. No ordinary woman in that time would have had the power to serially divorce 5 men. If any of those five marriages ended up in divorce, it was more likely the husband who divorced her. And most commonly it would have been for barrenness.

And we don't know who she's living with now – it could be the brother of her deceased husband. There was an obligation to the husband's surviving brothers to care for her. And even marry her to make descendants for the deceased brother. But if the woman was infertile, that ship may have sailed and he took her into his household so she'd have a means of support.

Whatever the circumstances, she's had a hard life. And she doesn't seem to be a part of the in-crowd who goes together to get water in the cooler morning hours. In a culture where such misfortune as hers was sometimes deemed disfavor from God, she was pushed to the margins of her community.

Jesus knows all that. Jesus knows not just about her – he knows what it is to be her. Because that's what happens when God becomes flesh. Jesus knows the thirst she has for peace...for love...for acceptance. Not even Jacob's well can slake that thirst.

But Jesus can.

As the dialog goes on, she maybe begins to feel a little bit of that living water well up in her. Could he really be the Messiah? No...this isn't what anyone expected. And here he is breaking all sorts of conventions...talking to a woman...and a Samaritan at that. Asking her for a drink.

But somewhere deep inside, she knew things would never be the same. Dropping her water jar and leaving it behind was like leaving her old life behind. That old life of loneliness and living on the fringe of the community. She ran straight into her new life.

Excited, she told her neighbors about this man...this prophet...who knew the truth about her...who really knew her.

She becomes the witness to Jesus who brings a whole town into relationship with Jesus...which in John's gospel is what belief is. Her life is transformed – and through her a whole village is.

She becomes the model for witnessing to Jesus. She has an encounter with him. She feels known and truly seen by him...she believes...and she's excited to tell others about that encounter. Notice however she's still not totally sure.

He can't be the Messiah, can he? Certainty is not a requirement for witnessing. It's just telling a story about your own encounter.

So, what are we thirsting for? Man after these past couple of years, I feel almost parched. I'm thirsty for less anxiety, less polarization. I'm thirsty...totally parched...for the end of this pandemic.

And there's still the everyday stuff – bills to pay, kids to feed, jobs profoundly impacted by the pandemic. Broken friendships...broken marriages...broken hearts. And for some, unspeakable tragedy like a housefire or the death of someone beloved.

We probably all in our own way know the kind of thirst this woman felt – a thirst no ordinary water could quench.

We too long to meet Jesus where he can really see us and truly know us – to offer us that living water.

Where do you find your living water? Where do you feel seen and truly known? Where do you get rejuvenated?

I hope that at least some of the time it's here...that you encounter Jesus here in a way that satisfies your thirst. That you encounter Jesus in the words and music and prayers. That you encounter Jesus in the bread and wine. Or in the relationships with friends you have here...the very embodiment of Jesus.

But the church isn't the only place. Maybe for you it's sometimes sharing a cup of coffee with a friend who truly knows and loves you or a blessed time with family. Maybe it's volunteering to serve in some way.

Maybe you find your living beside a literal body of water – a lake or stream or spring or hiking in a beautiful place where you feel God's presence in the creation around you. Maybe it's at the conservatory at Lauritzen Gardens where you can pretend it's not winter for a little while. Or maybe it's peering out the barren winter landscape and remembering that underneath that cold earth lies new life just waiting to burst out.

And maybe it's a strong enough sense that you too feel called to tell someone else...no bombastic speeches or altar calls...it doesn't even have to be very certain. Maybe it's just a simple sharing...something like, when I'm in church I find myself feeling refreshed and ready for life. I think that's Jesus...

Or this – I was out walking at Wilderness Park and had this strange sense that Jesus was there with me – and it's hard to describe the feeling. Or maybe you heard or read something at just the right time that totally changed your perspective on life.

Or maybe your witness is just simply that you don't think you could have gotten through this past couple of years without faith – without reminders from friends in the faith that God has not abandoned us, that God loves us.

I'm pretty sure that kind of living water has gotten me through the last few years.

It's been a thirsty couple of years for everyone. Jesus sees us, knows us...and knows what it is to be us in these very challenging times. And he offers us, too, this living water – living water from the eternal springs of God's heart, to well up in us, and to refresh and renew.