

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 12, 2023

EXODUS 17:1-7 | PSALM 95 | ROMANS 5:1-11 | JOHN 4:1-42

St. John says that Jesus had to be in Samaria, but—truth be told—that’s not quite right. Jesus was travelling from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north. The route Jesus took was a straight shot through Samaria. But there was another option. You could take a slightly longer route just across the Jordan River. So when John says that Jesus *had* to go through Samaria, he is—geographically speaking—wrong.

But when John said Jesus had to go through Samaria, he probably wasn’t talking about geography but about mission. Samaria was a hostile place for Jews like Jesus and the disciples. Jews and Samaritans didn’t get along. Long story short, they had many of the same religious texts and similar histories but different worship practices. They were right in that sweet spot where they were distinct enough to be two separate communities, but they had enough in common to know that the other guys were doing it wrong.

And that’s why John tells us that Jesus *had* to go to Samaria. It has nothing to do with geography and everything to do with why Jesus is here. Because if—as Jesus told Nicodemus last week—he is God’s self-expression of love for the world, then Jesus can’t just stay with his own community, and he can’t just go to the world “in general.” He needs to go to the world in particular, and that includes people his community really dislike. People like this woman that Jesus asks for a drink.

Now there’s a lot that we don’t know about this woman, and it can be easy to project our ideas onto her or read huge meaning into small details.¹ But even if we stick very close to the text itself, we can still learn a few very important things about this woman and how this encounter with Jesus transforms her.

One is that this woman doesn’t think kindly of Jews like Jesus. How does she respond to his request for a drink? She doesn’t just say, “No.” She drops in their identity groups as if to remind Jesus of exactly why this is a bad question. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” But how does Jesus respond to her rejection? He offers himself. “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.” Jesus responds to her skepticism and rejection by giving himself.

A second thing we know is that she has some interest in what Jesus is offering. When Jesus offers her the living water, she responds, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” There’s a recognition of need here. Why is Jesus sent to people beyond his own religious community? Because there’s need beyond his own community. This is why Jesus *had* to go to Samaria. Because Jews aren’t the only ones who need living water. The Samaritans and all the people of the earth need it, too.

And third—this is the tricky one—we know that this woman has some reticence about how she understands and presents her life. She’s been married five times, but she says she doesn’t have a

¹ For example, the fact that she is there at midday could be interpreted as a sign that she’s been ostracized by her community and unable to collect water with other women in the morning. But in John’s gospel where light is a positive image, it could also be a sign of faith. John’s statement that it was “the sixth hour” is usually interpreted as noon, but since the Roman custom started the day at noon, some interpret it as 6 PM which would make you reframe the whole dark/light image.

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husband. We don't know why she's been married so often. She could be a widow, she could have problems with infertility, she could have just been divorced. We don't know. And to some extent, it isn't really important. What's important is that she feels like she needs to present a certain version of her life around Jesus. When Jesus says that she's been married five times, it's not meant to be a *Gotcha!* moment. It's meant to say *I get it. You don't need to obfuscate and posture around me. I know what your life is like.* And sure enough, when she goes back to her community, that's why she tells people about Jesus. Because Jesus understands her.

See, what's remarkable in the story isn't simply that Jesus talks to people that we think he shouldn't be talking to. That's not really surprising. Jesus does that all the time. What's more remarkable is that Jesus takes real people with real lives and real losses and real burdens and real griefs and says, "These are the people who are going to convey my love for the world." Because when the woman goes back to her neighbors she proclaims, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" What the woman emphasizes is not the living water, but the fact that Jesus understands her situation. What she tried to downplay and hide now becomes the means by which God enters her life and the life of her community.

So the way that God transforms us is not by sort of undoing all of our pasts. And it isn't by airbrushing out the blemishes on our lives to make us look more presentable to our neighbors. Jesus transforms us by making us a part of God's mission. So that just as Jesus was sent to the world as a sign of God's love, we are sent as signs of God's great love for all creation.

Some of you may remember last week, we heard a story about another encounter Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a leader of his religious community. He's wise. He's well-read. He's someone people look up to. If you wanted to have a thirteenth disciple, Nicodemus would be your first choice. But what does Nicodemus do after he encounters Jesus? We don't know. We never hear about him again.

Who do we hear about instead? Who ends up becoming not just a disciple but an apostle of Jesus? The Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus doesn't erase her life or do it over but he brings it into God's service. John Chrysostom, who was an early church father, wrote that what was notable about the woman in this story is that she displays "the actions of an apostle, preaching the gospel to everyone she could and calling them to Jesus. She even drew out a whole city to hear him."²

And God transforms us the same way through our baptisms. There are no wrong types of people to be in service of God's mission. Only baptized people transformed by the grace of God and sent out to proclaim God's great love. That includes us and those we feel an affinity for. But it also includes those we never think about and those about whom we have nothing good to say.

That's why Jesus had to go to Samaria and why Jesus has to be present in our own lives. Not out of geographic necessity but out of eternal love. Jesus doesn't promise us lives that are easier or nicer or more pleasant. But he gives all of us lives given new purpose and meaning in the light of his resurrection.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 32:1.