

Third Sunday in Lent, Year A  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
March 12, 2023

Exodus 17:1-7 | Romans 5:1-11 | John 4:5-42 | Psalm 95

Have you ever had a friend or a family member or a spouse come in and join you in the middle of watching a movie? Invariably, just when you're getting deeper into the characters and the plot, they start asking questions. Who is that? Is this supposed to be New York? Is she a murderer? It's incredibly annoying. But also understandable. All of a sudden, they want to get a little backstory on the scene that's right in front of them. They want it to make sense.

Which is a bit of our situation when we hear the gospel story today. We're coming in in the middle of the long story between the Israelites and the Samaritans. They share parts of a religion but disagree on others—like Christians and Mormons. And at one point, the Israelites destroyed one of the Samaritan Temples, and the Samaritans are understandably still salty about it. So, the scene is tense when Jesus and his disciples find themselves talking together with Samaritans at the well. The story of the Israelites and the Samaritans has been going on for ages, and we're just coming in this morning in the middle of the movie.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well have a long conversation. A pretty classic read on this text focuses on the fact that the woman has been married five times and is living unmarried with a man. The church has long painted her as somehow fallen or promiscuous. But I would argue that that read says a lot more about the priorities of the men who wrote, interpreted and preached this story for two thousand years than it does about the woman at the well. The church never even bothered to give her a name, much less express any curiosity or interest in her story. Why had she been married five times? Was there a war, a plague, or a famine that was killing men? What were the economic and cultural factors for women at the time that required a woman to be in the household of a man? In what ways were her marriages significantly different from slavery? The church has given this woman precious little credit, and hopefully, we will change that a bit this morning. After all, Jesus thinks that she is important enough to talk with at great length—in fact, the longest dialogue in any of the gospels.

I'm less interested in her marital status than I am in the fact that she seems to have been one of the few people who could recognize Jesus. She wasn't a man. She wasn't from one of the twelve tribes of Israel. She wasn't rich or important or mighty. And yet, she, alone among the crowd, recognized Jesus. She saw who he was and what he would do. She recognized a prophet when he stood in front of her when so many others walked away.

The church has called her the woman at the well with five husbands. But she could just as easily be called the woman who proclaimed Jesus first. She could be called a preacher and a teacher.

I wonder if there has been a time when you have been put into a box not of your own making. Maybe the world tells you that there is only one thing that you are, only one road you can walk. This is kind of a silly example, but I remember being in seventh grade and having multiple adults

come to me and tell me that I should join the football team. I was a very early bloomer and was 6 foot and 236 pounds by 8th grade. So I get it—they looked at this hulking teenager and thought “whoa, we should make him be a linebacker.” But no one took any time to look any deeper. I was interested in theater, English class, music, church, and books about dragons. Never in my life had I watched an entire sporting match of any kind, much less a football game. And yet, some adults around me were quick to pin me down. And, I kind of started to wonder if they were right and I was wrong. And so, I played for one season as a freshman in high school. And guess what? I was not terribly good, I didn’t like it, and I kept referring to the practice as a rehearsal. The world told me something about myself that was not true, and I think I started to believe it. I would be very surprised if this has not happened to you at some point. Maybe the world tells you that because you are a man, you must be one thing. Or because you are old, or because you are young, or because you are divorced, or because your skin is a particular hue. I’m guessing that we are all hearing things all day about who the world says we are.

But, if we follow the lead of the brave woman at the well, we will find that, really, the only thing that matters is that we are seen clearly—not by the world—but by our God. God sees right into the core of us to call us into a deeper and worthy relationship with Godself and with one another. Jesus doesn’t care that she is a Samaritan. Doesn’t care that she is a woman. And doesn’t keep her in a box. Instead, all boxes are broken by our disruptive God. Jesus promises that there will be living water available for this woman. Jesus knows her name, even if the church will forget it. Jesus promises that worship of God will no longer be confined to a particular hill, or well, or temple but that worship will happen everywhere and every day. Jesus finds the unlikely person to be the recipient of his blessing as well as the prophet to the entire nation of Samaria, and now, two thousand years later, to the world. Our stained glass and our songs should be filled with images of this marvelous woman, and even though history and the church have forgotten her name, I am certain it is known to God. And you, my friends, are no different. You are not built to be in a box. And even if you feel that you are an unlikely recipient of God’s love or an unlikely prophet for God’s reign, remember this woman. And remember that you are just as worthy and just as loved as she. Keep your eyes peeled for Jesus, and let all the other stuff fall away. And, like the woman at the well, you will be sustained by the living water that is our God. Amen.