

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Psalm 65: 1, 9-13; John 4: Selected Verses

I want to begin the sermon today with a promulgation- an idea based on a long study of the subject: the Gospel of John is a little weird. It was written long after the other three in the Bible- long enough to sound and read as if it came from another century than the synoptics- Matthew, Mark and Luke- because it did. True, some of the texts are lovely- try John 14 or 3:16 which we dwelt on last Sunday. But much of the narrative containing John's words of Jesus is convoluted and obscure enough to make us scratch our heads like Nicodemus, or this woman at the well, and ask, "What does he mean by that?"

Jesus is on his way from Judea to Galilee. The most direct route was through the region of Samaria where orthodox Jews of the time did not go. When Israel split in two after the death of King Solomon, in the 8th century B.C., the Northern Kingdom, now Israel, established the city of Samaria as its capitol, unlike former Jerusalem in the south, now called Judah. There was no love lost in the separation and in Jesus' time, hundreds of years later, the Samaritans pretty much reinvented themselves as God's *true* chosen people, much to the resentment of the *other* chosen people of which Jesus was a part.

So, what is Jesus doing in Samaria, and especially what was he doing striking up a conversation with a Samaritan woman of all people? As a Samaritan and a female, this woman at the well was living on the margins and she knew it. Even she was surprised that Jesus would approach her for water and conversation. The disciples were aghast! What scandal could ensue from this! A proper Jewish man would never do such an improper thing!

Getting familiar with the way John writes his gospel tells us, more than once, that he likes drama. A good setup to a story keeps our attention. Like Nicodemus from last week, the woman, who unlike Nicodemus, is not even accorded a name, who seems to have nothing going for her- five ex-

husbands and quite possibly a reputation to either live up to or look down on- this nameless soul, when asked by the Son of God for a sip of water engages Jesus in a theological debate instead-one unlike any he has had even with his disciples. Like Nicodemus, she responds to Jesus' request with a perfectly logical statement: "You need a glass to drink the water with". Then, after hearing Jesus telling her that in exchange for a drink, he would give her "living water", she too seems to recognize something very special about this Jewish man. She pursues him further with a challenging question: "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, the Father of Israel, who gave us this well? (This lady might be a nobody to the world but she knows her stuff....)

The repartee' continues with Jesus telling her the water he offers is so good to drink that she will never be thirsty again. She is both so intrigued by his words and so tired of the drudgery of carrying water every day of her life that she demands straightaway: "Sir, give me this water". The story gets even better as the woman believes Jesus first to be a prophet, then after further talking with him, she is so moved by Jesus that she takes the leap of faith that the learned Nicodemus never could, and lays a proposition on the table: "I know the Messiah is coming someday and will explain everything, but.....?".

And Jesus completes her question with his decisive answer: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you now".

Say you are a working woman or man. You get up each day, have your coffee, get washed up and dressed, and trudge out to your pickup and trundle off to your job. Your job is working in a widget factory. You make widgets. You do not know why, other than to eat and pay your rent; you don't know what widgets are for; you just know how to make them. And so you do that, day in and out, month after month. You are a cog in a great machine. It is a lonely, boring job you have, supporting the lonely boring life you lead. One day, a stranger shows up at the widget factory and walks over to your station and beings to speak to you in very direct and engaging terms, in front of everyone else. You have been singled out and you don't know whether to

feel embarrassed or special. The stranger asks what you are doing, and you tell him you are a widget maker. He asks what widgets are for and you tell him you do not know.

Then the stranger tells you what widgets are for. He tells you the entire history of widget making from time immemorial and how widgets contribute to the welfare of society, and how utterly important it is that you are making these widgets. Rather than feel embarrassed any longer, you begin to feel special. It turns out that *you are somebody*. And then the man begins to tell you things about yourself that no one else knows. He is familiar with every aspect of your life. He knows your story- your highs and lows, wins and losses, your accomplishments and disappointments. But, most of all he knows your secrets-even the ones you hide from yourself- the ones that fuel your pain and feed your guilt. In short, this man knows your sins.

You begin to realize that this man is unlike any other you have ever met. There is something about his way, his countenance, that you find attractive and safe. It is as if you could tell him all about yourself-even the bad parts which he already knows-and not feel ashamed or afraid. As you remain in this man's company, you feel more and more relieved, rejuvenated. The dreariness and drudgery, the dull thud of ennui and world-weariness that has dogged your life begins to fall away. And by God, you are happy again- *and* your sins are washed away!

Then, without asking for permission you go running all over the widget factory telling anyone who will listen that they can feel good too- that you have been talking with this man who shows you that your life is not a 'bummer' and their job of widget making, as vital as it is to the world economy, is not all there is to their existence. They can find happiness in their jobs, their homes and, like Jesus told this woman at the well..... they should go to church more often...

Moral of both stories, the well woman and widget maker: God does not intend that we be deprived of his/her company. God wants to provide water that is life giving and nourishment that is soul stirring. The words of Psalm

65 cannot make it any clearer: “You visit the earth and water it....you provide the people with grain....you crown the year with bounty”.

Our only caveat is that we be humble and perceptive enough to receive God when the time is nigh for a meeting. Don't miss your chance to find God along your Lenton way expecting a well-deserved explanation for how and why everything is the way it is. That was Nicodemus's downfall. Just lean in, walk on, look out, and wait for God to find you to give you good news- whether it is at Jacob's Well or on the floor of a widget factory.

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