

Uncharted Waters

Sermon Preached at the Cathedral Church of All Saints, Halifax

March 15, 2020 Lent 3

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

John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 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.) 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.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 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.' 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.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' 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.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

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?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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 Saviour of the world.'

Many years ago, when I was in my late teens, I purchased a white Dodge panel van. I had an uncle who had a dealership and gave me a good deal. Eventually I would convert it into a camper, but at the time of this story, it was just an empty shell with 2 front seats.

It was winter in New Hampshire, and I was out on a snowy morning and had almost made it to the crest of a long steep hill, when my forward momentum slowed to a crawl and I began to lose traction. Tires spinning - it inched forward then came to a halt and – began to slide, backwards, down that same long steep hill, lined with trees and stone walls on both sides. The brakes were useless, and so too, I quickly discovered, any ability to steer. I was going to crash I just didn't know when, or exactly how, or how badly.

This is an odd time and place for us to be in as a world community, and particularly here in this city as we wait for what we can only assume is coming. We are in uncharted waters here. And apart from, instinctively, knowing that we should stock up on toilet paper, we are not sure what we should do!

No one is around that remembers the Spanish influenza that ended exactly 100 years ago. Polio and tuberculosis were still vivid memories in my youth, (but that wasn't yesterday) – SARS and MERS, H1N1, are our most recent memories of widespread infectious diseases of this potential, but they had little impact on us here in Nova Scotia.

I had an e-mail from Dr. Ken Rockwood last night, a professor of geriatrics and public health, and a 9 o'clock parishioner, who was in London this past week at a conference where he says they spent most of their time "talking about COVID-19, and frailty". He is now safely home, but not with us today because he is self-quarantined for the next 14 days. We are in uncharted waters.

The fact that we are here today, even though with some restrictions on how we will worship and relate to one another, is quickly becoming risky behavior. In many parts of Canada, meeting for worship is simply not happening, and as things rapidly and fluidly change, we may find ourselves under similar constraints.

Uncharted waters indeed. ..

If I can make the leap, with respect to today`s Gospel, we are also in uncharted territory with respect to the encounter between Jesus, and a woman at a well.

The story, on the surface, is a simple narrative. Jesus and his disciples are out on the road carrying their message of hope and salvation, in the early days of his ministry, and that missionary journey has taken them south into Judea.

In fact if we go back to chapter two we find Jesus performing his first miracle, turning water into wine, at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Following that event he heads to Jerusalem, for the Passover, where we read of him cleansing the temple of those who have turned the holy shrine into little more than a market place for tourists.

While there, the authorities, political and religious, discover that his followers are growing in number, and in the first 4 verses of chapter 4, which are omitted from our reading this morning, we read that the Pharisees heard, that; “Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John” and so they left Judea and started back to Galilee. **But**, John our Gospel writer notes, he *had* to go through Samaria.

Now pause there just for a moment, we know something of the tension between Jews and Samaritans, it is at the core of the message of the parable of the “good Samaritan” which to the listener was an oxymoron. Good and Samaritan didn’t sit easily, side by side, on the tongue.

The history of that enmity was long, and like most prejudices, was based on half-truths and misunderstanding which dated back almost one thousand years.

Following the death of King Solomon in 932 BC, the Kingdom of Israel split into two political entities, Israel was the northern region with Samaria as the capital, and Judah in the south with Jerusalem as its capital. Each ended up with their own temple, the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, the Jews on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

Over the ensuing centuries, in its various conflicts and battles with neighbouring countries and foreign powers, Samaria was conquered by the Assyrians and the land became settled with foreigners. The foreigners brought their pagan religious beliefs which became entwined with that of the Hebrews and the people intermarried. The traditional Jews, accused the Samaritans of idolatry, abandoning their faith and their heritage, straying away from God, and considered them now - an inferior race.

The hostility against Samaritans continued well into the first century, of Jesus time, so much so that devout Jews would actually go many miles out of their way to avoid traveling through that hated land, they wouldn't set foot there! So to read in today's Gospel that Jesus (quote) "*had* to go through Samaria on his return trip to Galilee" is a misnomer. He didn't *have* to go there, he *chose* to go. Uncharted territory here.

So that's the backdrop to what takes place this morning, in what will turn out to be the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone – in all of scripture. And one of the most touching and revealing.

With that historic context, we return to our story. It is the heat of the day, Jesus and company have stopped by an ancient well, said to have been dug by none other than Jacob himself, but there is no bucket on a rope or ladle to draw up water – so close, yet out of reach. As a source of water perhaps there are some trees to offer a bit of shade, so Jesus sits to rest and sends the disciples off to find food and drink.

Enter now the woman. We've set the stage for the relationship between the Jews and Samaritans. As so often happens we typically see these relationships from only one side. The Jews have a problem with Samaritans, we get that – well the Samaritans have a problem with the Jews! Centuries of being despised and belittled breeds a mutual bitterness.

The woman arrives at the well, jug in hand, and Jesus says to her; "give me a drink", no "please, may I..." – just, "give me a drink". Now maybe John left out the "please", part, but either way, the introduction is based on a request; "give me a drink". And the Samaritan woman says to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" How do you suppose she said those words? Was there an angry edge to her; "how dare you ask me"? "Who do you think you are telling me what to do"?

Or, was there wonderment? That a Jew would speak to her was unusual, that a man would speak to a woman conversationally, in public, was also unprecedented and questionable. And to think that he would take water from her was a religious transgression. Jesus would be "unclean". Uncharted territory here again!

Now just another thought about this woman. John in writing this says it is the middle of the day and this woman is alone. That's an odd time to be drawing water. Most women, or children, who were tasked with getting water, did so in the early morning, or in the cool of the evening, not the hottest part of the day. Was she, in a word that has become part of our current conversations; social distancing? Self-isolating? Why was she alone?

Was it because of, as Jesus would reveal to her, her history? She had been married 5 times and the man she is with now is not her husband.

To be clear, I don't think this has anything to do with judgment or morality here, but it has a lot to do with this woman's sense of self image and perceived worth. This is not a case of her being unlucky in love, or making poor life choices about a partner.

In a male centered society, her plight was not of her own doing. A woman could not leave a husband. Perhaps her husband died, and as the law dictated she was "passed on" to her husband's brother(s) who have died, or she was divorced from them, abandoned. She is not there by choice; it is what life has dealt her.

She no doubt felt abandoned by God also. The "cause-effect" theology of the day would see her as rejected by God. So here she is alone, on her own, avoiding the crowds of chattering women, and their sideways glances, murmurings, and innuendo. She approaches the well, only to find a stranger. It must have been more than a bit unsettling for her.

Jesus initiates the conversation that will follow with a request, "give me a drink".

Her wonderment or suspicion of his request is further deepened when in response to her questioning of that request, he says; "if you knew who was asking you, you would have asked me, and I would have given you living water". Living water, what does that even mean? It conjures up for me a swift running stream sparkling in the sun, as opposed to a dank pool in the bottom of a deep well. We know that's not what he's talking about, but she doesn't. "What do you mean", she asks, "you have no bucket and the well is deep, if you had access to water why would you be asking me"?

Her literal interpretation of his remark causes her to say, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

And now the conversation takes an even more curious turn: Jesus says to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answers him, "I have no husband."

Whatever fear or apprehension she had in her initial encounter with this strange man has faded. She tells him, the truth of her life, and Jesus in commending that truth and honesty, fills in the blanks. "You are right, you have had five husbands and the man you are with now is not your husband."

Jesus' words are not meant to razzle-dazzle her, or impress her with wizard skills; - they go to the very heart of who she is, and what she longs most deeply for. Jesus is saying, in essence, "I know you; I know more about you than you know about yourself". And, "I see a worth and value in you that has been lost and buried by life". That's the revelation! That's the water that does more than fill a jug, or slake one's thirst, that's the water that gives, restores, life! She is, in a sense, baptized in that moment - born anew.

"I know that when the Messiah comes he will reveal everything", she stammers.

“I am he, the one that is speaking to you”. Whoa, chills up and down the spine!

To this woman, to this Samaritan(!), before he tells anyone else, before even confirming it with his own disciples, Jesus reveals his true identity. “I am the Messiah”.

And the transformation is amazing. The same woman, who has borne the burden of her lot in life, now rushes back to the city to tell everyone, and anyone, what has happened; carefree, liberated overjoyed – *and* without her water jug! Living water indeed is flowing through her.

The disciples on their return are amazed to see Jesus in conversation; so amazed that they can't even bring themselves to ask; “why you are speaking to this woman?” or, “what does she want with you?” They too find themselves in deep uncharted water. The journey with Jesus, they are discovering, is one of twists and turns with surprises around every corner.

My van did crash, by the way. It's a strange feeling in that split second when you realize you are no longer in control and are helpless to change the inevitable. Predictability and control are what we base our lives on. To let go of that requires – well - you might call it, faith. I simply let go of my efforts to correct its backward course and held my breath. It ended up in a ditch cradled by a snowbank, and I walked away shaken but not broken.

And so as you and I face an uncertain future, let us not forget the one who knows us more deeply than we know ourselves, the one who journeys with us in times of both puzzlement and amazement. This anxious, churning, stomach sensation, brought on by a very disturbingly uncertain tomorrow, is best met with faith. As we navigate these turbulent, uncharted waters, may we have faith in our leaders, our medical researcher workers, doctors and nurses, care givers; and faith in one another.

Time does not permit me to speak about our first lesson; Moses and a cantankerous people, where water springs forth in a very unexpected place, but their question hangs in the air; “Is the Lord among us or not?” Uncharted waters indeed, but the one who has brought us to this place, will not abandon us, of that I am certain.

Amen.