

Living Water

John 4:5-42

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” With ashen fingers, I spoke those words as I marked crosses on foreheads on Ash Wednesday. In doing so, this community was calling to mind the frailty of human life and acknowledging our dependence upon God, our Creator and Redeemer. And, if only for a season, the dryness of the ashes and dust opens to us a period of days before Easter—this season of Lent—to examine how parched our lives may have become.

Really, I’m not sure it takes 40 days for most of us to figure that out. All it takes is a quick glance at the morning’s paper, where we read story after story describing everything from the entrenched ideologies that divide our nation to the protracted war in Iraq to the unrest in Kosovo to an uncertain economic outlook, to see the frailty of our lives.

And some of us don’t even have to look at the news. We see evidence enough in our own homes, where empty chairs at our table are vivid reminders that not all families who pray together stay together. We know the ache in our hearts over someone we loved who is no longer there, and our very hearts become parched places thirsting for anything to quench our pain.

I am thankful for this season of Lent, for this time to consider the ways that we are acutely aware of the frailty of human life and to drink deeply of the living waters that flow from the heart of God. And John’s Gospel is the perfect companion for such a journey. I think Augustine was right when he described how John, “like an eagle, takes a loftier flight, and soars above the dark mist of the earth, to gaze with steadier eyes upon the light of truth.” In this first part of his Gospel, John uses two stories to proclaim the truth that the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus, and we wonder if either Nicodemus or the unnamed woman at the well will figure it out. They are identity stories. John wants people to figure out who Jesus is.

Several years ago the Presentation Team at the Presbyterian Youth Triennium designed an elaborate set that recreated the Garden of Eden so that they could reenact the serpent’s temptation of Adam and Eve. The team consisted of an adult male and two adult females, one who whom drew the unenviable role of the serpent. When her time to enter the stage arrived, she didn’t walk in like a normal actor. No, she slinked as (as a serpent would do) down a vine-covered pole that had been constructed from high above the stage.

The following days, several youth were involved in the dramas and they took turns playing the juicier roles in the plays. And the tempter

appeared in each scene, only the actor who played the tempter changed from day to day. In order to help us in the pews follow along, “the tempter of the hour” wore a vine around his or her shoulders that signaled to us all: “I am the tempter here.”

Sometimes I wonder if the characters in John’s Gospel wouldn’t have preferred that the Messiah be marked in a similar way. Perhaps Jesus could wear “the glowing halo” we see in classic paintings, or perhaps Jesus could illumine his face as Monica used to do on *Touched by an Angel* when she revealed her identity to somebody. Quite simply, John doesn’t give his characters any easy answers as they try to figure out who Jesus is.

Last week, we considered Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, a respected religious leader. We were invited to consider how God loves us enough to give us the gift of the Son, and we talked about how we don’t have to wait until after we die to live the abundant life that God gives us in Jesus Christ.

Today, however, we see a completely different scene. While the first story happened in the middle of the night, this one takes place in the middle of the day. In the first story, we have a well-respected male religious leader whose name we are told; in today’s story, we meet an unnamed woman who is not respected at all, perhaps even an outcast. When Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a question, he was putting his reputation at risk. But now, when Jesus comes to the Samaritan woman, it is his reputation that is at risk.

There’s no question that John has placed these two stories in such close connection. And there’s also no doubt that these stories are ultimately about Jesus.

In this beautifully crafted story of the woman at the well, rich in details and nuanced conversation, we get a hint of everything to come in John’s Gospel. What we have in John’s Gospel is John’s desire that people come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing they would have life in his name. Though this story can spin in a thousand directions, I want us to think about this story through the lens of what it means to discover in our own lives who Jesus is, and then to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As I mentioned just a minute ago, in this story, Jesus is presented as deliberately crossing gender and ethnic boundaries for theological reasons. And it is abundantly clear in John’s Gospel that this unnamed Samaritan woman stands in sharp contrast to Nicodemus, whom we met in the previous chapter. They are polar opposites. One is named and male; the other unnamed and female. One is a distinguished religious leader; the other is a despised foreigner. Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark of night while the

Samaritan woman meets Jesus at noon. But the striking difference is this: at the end of their encounters with Jesus, only one of them gets it; only one figures out who Jesus is and then goes to bear witness to what they have seen and heard. And, as will happen often throughout John's Gospel, the one who gets it is not the one you might expect. It wasn't the religious leader who got it, but the outcast.

In this way, this unnamed Samaritan woman embodies one of the primary marks of true discipleship in John's Gospel: she bears witness to Jesus.¹ But, when you take a close look at the witness, a witness that ends up leading her whole village to faith, you will find no formula to put into a tract to hand out. You will simply find this: "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?'" As one commentator said, "this is not exactly a recitation of the Apostles' Creed."²

She is a tentative witness, to be sure, but she is a faithful witness. She is so moved by her encounter with Jesus that she is compelled to share the news. In a deep sense, she wants her friends to meet Jesus, not to validate her own experience, but so that they too can have their own experience of the one they come to call "the savior of the world."

I love the way Fred Craddock has described this scene: The woman "is a witness, but not a likely witness and not even a thorough witness....She is not even a convinced witness: 'Can this be the Christ?' is literally 'This cannot be the Christ, can it?' Even so, her witness is enough: it is invitational (come and see), not judgmental; it is within the range permitted by her experience; it is honest with its own uncertainty; it is for everyone who will hear. How refreshing. Her witness avoids triumphalism, hawking someone else's conclusions, packaged answers to unasked questions, thinly veiled ultimatums and threats of hell, and assumptions of clarity on theological matters. She does convey, however, her willingness to let her hearers arrive at their own affirmations about Jesus, and they do: 'This is indeed the Savior of the world.'"³

Notice this: there is no neatly worked out system of belief. Nor are her words offensive. And there are any number of reasons to question her authority for serving as a witness, but her witness is enough.

And so are ours. You see, our lives of faith are really about what God is doing, not about what we are doing. All we must do is tell the old, old

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 118.

² Fred B. Craddock, "The Witness at the Well (John 4:5-42)", *Christian Century*, March 7, 1990, p. 243.

³ Fred B. Craddock, "The Witness at the Well (John 4:5-42)", *Christian Century*, March 7, 1990, p. 243.

story of what God has done, is doing, and will do in our own lives, and in the midst of this world that God loves. The work we are called to as members of the church is a ministry of witness to all that God is up to in the world, but more than that, what God is up to in our own lives. That's why it is called gospel, for it is exceedingly good news.

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