

Sermon Text for February 12, 2017

Genesis 12:1-7; John 4:25-30, 39-42

“Come and See”

By Holly Miller

Like everyone, for me there are passages in the Bible that I know I will never comprehend, there are passages that I read and reread because I love them so, because they comfort me or lift me up or make me laugh. Then there are passages where I seem to land repeatedly because I discover something new every time I visit. One of those is John’s tale of the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. It’s a familiar tale, yet there are so many things happening, so many moving parts. However, I think it’s the improbable nature of the story that intrigues me most. It is just so unlikely. I’d like to visit that story this morning and listen in, not so much to the lengthy conversation between Jesus and the woman, which is one of the longer dialogues with Jesus included in Scripture, but rather to what follows that “chance” encounter at the well.

First, some background from the time when Israel was divided into 2 kingdoms... In 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians who took the Israelites into captivity. During that time the Jews from the northern kingdom removed their law against intermarrying and married among the Assyrians. In 583 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians with whom they did not intermarry. When exiles returned, and now fast forwarding to the time when Jesus walked that land, there was hatred between the Jews (who had remained pure ethnically) and the Samaritans (who were considered by the Jews to be “half-breeds” both physically and spiritually). You will remember that Jesus used that enmity to shame the Jewish legal experts when he told the story of the good Samaritan, the only person who stopped to help a man who had been beaten, robbed and left to die along the roadside. There were differences in worship between the Jews and the Samaritans, the Jews worshiped in Jerusalem, the Samaritans on Mt. Gerizim, right beside Jacob’s well and the town where our story takes place today, Sychar. Let’s look now at the gospel of John, chapter 4, verses 25 to 30, then 39-42. **Read Scripture. [Prayer: Lord God Almighty, we are here today to receive what you want to reveal to us about Jesus, your Son. Shine your light of understanding on your Word and in our hearts. Amen.]**

So Jesus enters the scene. He has already aroused the jealousy of the Pharisees and he is traveling from Judea to Galilee with Samaria right in the middle. He does not choose to go around Samaria, but rather right through it, right by Mount Gerizim and stops near the village of Sychar, at Jacob's well. Last week Pastor Bob recited a familiar verse: "God so loved the Presbyterians, right? No, God so loved the world." This passage in John that we're studying today very clearly demonstrates Jesus' love for all, not just for the Jews, but for the Samaritans as well. In this case, he begins with one Samaritan, a woman, an outcast.

Lest you think that how one person's life is lived does not matter in God's grand scheme of things, let's return to the last time I spoke with you – last summer. The life in question then was that of a man lame from birth placed daily on a mat outside the Jerusalem temple to beg. He responded when Peter commanded him "Look at us." Disciples Peter and John brought the power of Christ into the lame man's life and he was healed in the name of Jesus. Immediately, he began jumping up and down for joy, he entered the temple for the first time in his life and was noticed by many, leading them to listen to what Peter had to say and thus, to a belief in Christ. One life – praising God by leaping. Do you remember my "what ifs?" I asked, "What if, after being healed, he sat back down on his mat as though nothing had happened and continued his daily begging?" What then? There would have been no change, no joy or transformation for him or anyone else. Others might never have had their meeting with Christ. Isn't it interesting...neither the lame man nor the woman at the well are even named in the Bible, yet both are responsible for bringing multitudes to Jesus?

I have more "what-ifs," this time in regard to the life of the Samaritan woman. What if, after her encounter with Jesus, she started back to the village, but in her excitement became confused and took the wrong path (I'll grant you that's unlikely because there probably was only one path back) or what if she stopped along the way – maybe even to do something good (let's say, to deliver water to someone) and was delayed in her return to the village? By the time she rounded everyone up, Jesus might have traveled on (after all, he was in Samaria, not the place where Jews tended to linger). She would have been doing a good deed, but not the one she was called to do. What if the Samaritan woman had drawn water from the well, filled her water jar, then lugged the heavy jar all the way home? Again, by the time she got there, she may have been too late and the Samaritan villagers might have missed Jesus.

One line in this passage that always gives me pause is verse 28: “Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town. . . .” Why did she leave that jar behind? In her culture the jar had value; it was a necessity – she needed it to live. She left it behind.

Had she found something even more valuable – the living water for which she had been searching? Although she believed the Messiah was coming, the woman with five previous husbands and now a lover had many questions. Her questions were answered in her encounter with Jesus. Had the living water He promised given her more life, refreshed her more than the water she would draw from the well? In John’s description of the meeting, we never see her draw water from the well nor actually give Jesus a drink, but even if her water jar was full, she left it behind.

While she is speaking with Jesus at the well, his disciples return from rounding up a meal in town. They arrive at the most inopportune time – the climax of the conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus: vs. 25-26 – The woman has just said, *“I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”* Then Jesus declared, *“I, the one speaking to you – am he.”* The woman has just heard that she is standing in the presence of the Messiah! At that very moment the disciples interrupt. She can see the questions on their faces (why is Jesus talking with a woman? a Samaritan woman? alone?), so she quickly departs, leaving her water jar behind. All of this to say, one life and what we might call the smallest details in that life – a water jar, an interruption at a precise moment – do matter and are used by God.

The Samaritan woman’s understanding of the Messiah she anticipated was that he would explain everything to us. What does Jesus do? He meets her expectations: he explains everything to her. Her testimony then became, “He told me everything I ever did.” She testified out of her own experience with Jesus, not someone else’s. She witnessed what she knew from her relationship with Jesus. The result was that many believed. Even more believed when they heard the words of Jesus themselves, had their own encounter with Him. The woman called Jesus “the Messiah” – he understood all about her. The Samaritans called him “the Savior of the world” (not just the Savior of the Jews). How incredible. So few understood Jesus at all after spending much time with him, but these hated Samaritans got it right after two days; the woman, even more quickly!

Let's draw out several points from the woman's encounter with Jesus. First, Jesus met her expectations *and* he met her where she was. This woman was not learned. Though she had religious yearnings or questions – she was searching and waiting for the Messiah – she was at the same time evidently living in sin (five husbands, now living with a sixth man). It is thought that she came to the well at noon in the heat of the day because she was ostracized, an outcast as a woman of loose morals. She was rejected by the Jews because she was a Samaritan, rejected by her culture because she was a woman, and rejected in her own village for the shame of her sin. That sounds like three strikes and you're out! Not in Jesus' kingdom! Jesus met this woman where she was.

Second, even though she had at least three strikes against her, she also hit a few balls out of the park; she had: a) a desire to learn and worship the truth, b) the willingness to put aside her possessions (her water jar) in order to receive what Jesus offered, and c) the willingness to lay aside her self-consciousness to share what she had found. She did not hoard Jesus or keep Him for herself; she opened her damaged heart for a harvest. At the time it was winter in Samaria and harvest was four months away, but the white billowed over the fields as the Samaritans came out to meet Jesus. They were ripe for harvesting.

A third point we notice is that though the book of John contains many miracles, this woman did not witness Jesus performing one – her water did not turn into wine – rather, she experienced him personally and he understood all about her. He did not make her feel lowly or rejected even though he spoke the truth directly to her. Jesus offered living water and she accepted. She saw and heard Him; she listened and believed. Then this outcast ran back to her village, witnessed with joy what she had received, using simple words, “Come and see.” A conduit for the calling of others, this woman's utterance, “come and see,” altered the lives of the Samaritans.

When this sinful woman of mixed origin shared the Good News of the gospel, she became one of the most effective evangelizers in the New Testament, simply by telling her own story. When we witness, it will be the sharing of our own unique experience. What is the story God has given you to share? How have you experienced Jesus? How has He transformed your life? How are you witnessing with your words? With your life? Is your life revealing God's glory or hiding it? Dr. Jerry Bridges, in his book Respectable Sins, uses the phrase “cosmic assault” to

signify times when we do things (sins that are considered respectable or at least acceptable – you know, little sins that don't really count - hmmm) that actually assault or hide God's glory. If this woman continues to live in sin following her encounter with Jesus, her testimony will be devalued; her witness will fade, along with the reflection of God's glory that others might have seen in her. Not witnessing when God presents the opportunity also serves to hide His glory.

This woman had an encounter with God. In the Old Testament such an encounter was often marked by the raising of an altar – a heap of stones would commemorate the place of being in the presence of God. In our first Scripture reading in Genesis, Abram built an altar to God at the great tree of Moreh, the spot where God appeared to him. In the New Testament we read eyewitness accounts, for instance those of Peter and John who were on the mountain with Jesus when he was transfigured. We can also witness the change, the transformation that occurs in lives experiencing the event. These lives themselves become the altar or the witness to God's transformative power. They glorify God as they continue to live in His presence. In a sense I see our lives as living altars, our place of fellowship and communion with God that spills out into our lives and witnesses Christ to others. Have you ever heard it said, "You don't need to keep asking Christ into your heart? After the first time, he's there." That may be true, but shouldn't we start living in such a way that all can see He is there? For the past two weeks, Pastor Bob has reminded us that the sacraments, baptism and communion, are the signs of our new covenant; they represent that we are the people of God. "But," as Pastor Bob said, "it is up to us to live them out."

How might your living altar spread God's glory in this world of darkness? Imagine what your own "come and see" might do. Many of us have had our meeting with Christ and been refreshed by His living water; we know that peace that passes understanding, the joy and delight in our hearts from knowing Jesus. The question I want to form before you is what are we doing about sharing that peace and joy? Are we jumping, leaping, or sitting back down on the mat? Are we running back to town, shouting, "This is it; I've found the one! Come and See!?" Or are we holding on tightly to that water jar? What is it that you and I are holding onto and are afraid to let go? Let's peel our clamped fingers off the water jar and release them and our lives to do God's work. If you are willing to loosen your grip on your water jar, put aside your doubts to witness to your encounter with Jesus, your very own encounter, then in the words of a song written by

Cindy Berry, “Bring what you have to the Savior, whether great or small, lay it at His feet. He can bless and multiply, so that all will magnify the name of Jesus, our Lord.”

Yes, one life does matter. And that one life is mine and yours. Will you answer your kingdom-call?

Altar Affirmation: If you answer that question with “yes,” that you want your life to be a living witness to the glory of God, come stand at the altar where we will affirm that yes with prayer.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for your revelation of Jesus to us this morning. Thank you, for sending Him to us so that we are transformed and our lives become living altars to spread your glory in our homes, throughout our village of Strasburg and into the world. Help each one of us here today to release our fingers from our water jars so that we can say, just as the woman of Samaria exclaimed, “Come and see! I have tasted the living water!” In the name of Jesus, the Savior of the world! Amen.