

Living Water
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“Living Water” Pilgrim Church UCC, March 19, 2017, (John 4:5-42) Third Sunday in Lent

One of the most immediately shocking things about being in the Holy Land is hearing people speak about Biblical places within a modern context. For example, you hear: “The traffic in Bethlehem is brutal this morning.” “I hope the air conditioning is working at that church in Capernaum, it’s so humid this time of year.” “This man came all the way from Jericho to be here with us tonight” and so on. These places that you read about in the Bible, these foreign names that you say (worrying sometimes about pronunciation) are actual places where people still live. It’s one thing to know that intellectually, it’s another to hear people speak about these ancient biblical places in daily conversations let alone actually go there and see what the land is like now.

That’s why some scholars call the Holy Land the Fifth Gospel because being in the physical places where Jesus walked and taught and healed and made disciples makes the stories come alive. Paul Wright who taught a class on Biblical Geography at Tantur said that we become more alive to the Bible in the Holy Land, and he was right. So you can imagine our surprise and delight when we were planning some travels in the West Bank and going over our itinerary as a group, and Ghada (our guide) said off-handedly, “On the way to Nablus tomorrow we’re going to stop and speak to some Samaritans before going to Taybeh.” Almost everyone in our group on the bus had a time out, wait a second, hold the phone moment of “we’re going to hang out with Samaritans tomorrow?” Like... THE Samaritans. Are they even still around and where exactly do they live?

Samaritans still live on Mount Gerizim in the immediate vicinity of the West Bank city of Nablus. The Samaritan woman at the well says to Jesus in our Gospel passage from John 4 this morning, “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”[1] That mountain where her ancestors worshiped is Mount Gerizim the holy mountain of the Samaritans where they still live. There’s only 785 Samaritans left in the world—half of them live on top of Mount Gerizim and the other half live in the city of Holon near Tel Aviv! We spent time at the Samaritan Museum with the brother of the High Priest who was a hoot and said that there are some single Samaritan men these days just in case any ladies were interested in converting and staying behind on the mountain. It’s quite nice! And he emphasized that he is the Good Samaritan and the Samaritans are still on their holy mountain. Go out and tell the world that you met the Good Samaritan and we’re still here on the mountain of our ancestors.

It’s amazing that Samaritans are still around considering how much the Samaritans and the Jews hated one another. Scholar Karoline Lewis in her Commentary on John reminds us that it’s not necessary (geographically speaking) for Jesus and his disciples to go through Samaria to get from Judea to Galilee. Jews would most likely not travel out of the way to Samaria because of the risk of running into Samaritans. The history of the feud between the Samaritans and Jews is complicated—but the Jews considered Samaritans outsiders and even idolaters. However the Samaritans understood themselves to be descendants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.[2] So when in the Samaritan Museum these days, you will find ancient Torah scrolls because the Samaritans still hold as sacred the Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Though the Samaritans always considered their place of worship Mount Gerizim not Jerusalem, and that helped maintain this schism for centuries.

At the end of the day, Samaria would be the last place that Jesus as a Jewish man would ever be expected to journey to show people how deeply and compassionately God loves the world.

But there we find Jesus—in Samaria alone with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. We’re supposed to be a little nervous when we read this story because so many boundaries are being crossed here. As Lewis explains so well: “We have a man speaking to a woman, a rabbi speaking to a woman, a Jew speaking with a Samaritan, a Jewish rabbi speaking with a Samaritan, and now, we find out, they are alone.”[3] And it’s all happening in public in the middle of the day out in the open for anyone passing by to see! Gasp!

One of the boundaries not being crossed though are moral boundaries if you will. Jesus as the pure Son of God speaking to this sinful woman with a sketchy past—that’s not what this story is about. Often people interpret this woman as having “loose morals” because she’s had five husbands. Given sexism present in society and definitely in the Church, that interpretation is not a huge surprise. In actuality, the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well was probably barren and had husbands either divorce her or die over the years. Women couldn’t divorce men, and barrenness was always blamed on the woman. When Jesus says in the story that she’s living with a man who’s not her husband it doesn’t mean that she’s shacking up with some man. She’s most likely living with her dead husband’s brother which was stipulated in Deuteronomy and shows how vulnerable this woman happens to be. You notice Jesus doesn’t say to her (like the woman caught in adultery in John 8 for instance)—“Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”[4] Jesus doesn’t have to tell the woman at the well to not sin again because she’s the victim here. The victim of this patriarchal society where she gets passed from one man to another because she’s seen as damaged goods or defective for not being able to have children. The blatant sexism present when most folks interpret her story is just awful.

We have clues that this woman had a hard life because it was the duty of women to get water for the family. You would typically go twice a day—early in the morning and in the evening when it was cooler. In some parts of the world, this is still the case: the women in Mainalli, India are always the ones to go and fetch the water from wells in town I’ve noticed on my visits. Though water fetching is a communal activity women do with other women. Meanwhile, our Samaritan woman is there by herself at the well at about noon. In the heat of the day she’s walking alone to Jacob’s well and there encounters Jesus feeling tired out by his own journey. One can imagine her as marginalized within the community of Samaritans who were themselves marginalized within the larger Jewish context. Other women were probably cruel to her—she’s had five husbands and no children, what’s wrong with her? What sin do you think she or her parents committed that lead to her fate? Do you think she’s cursed? Women sometimes do incredible damage when we tear down fellow women, still happens today. So this Samaritan woman just doesn’t deal with those petty mean girls who gossip. Instead, she trudges out to the well by herself in the heat of the day to get her water in peace and go back home to an uncertain future awaiting her.

Though one day a remarkable Jewish man named Jesus is just sitting there resting. He sees her and talks to her and fundamentally changes her life by offering her Living Water. Jesus startles her with this good news of new life, and she leaves her water jar behind and goes back to the city to tell people “come and see.” These are the same exact words Jesus uses in John’s Gospel to call his own disciples—“come and see.”[5] As Karoline Lewis writes, “She leaves behind her ostracism, her marginalization, her loneliness, because Jesus has brought her into his fold. She leaves behind her disgrace, her disregard, and the disrespect she has endured to enter into a new reality, a new life that is abundant life.”[6]

This Gospel story is one of encounter and relationship. Made all the more remarkable considering the many boundaries that were crossed in order to have this relationship begin.

Boundaries crossed to have the Living Water offered from Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well accepted so that she may have life and have it abundantly. We can ask ourselves who are those people marginalized in our own communities and how do we come to truly see them as Jesus saw this woman? As disciples of Jesus Christ in the world, how do we offer this spirit of abundance to others? Because make no mistake we are the hands and feet of Christ in the world. We are called to show compassion just as Christ showed compassion to this ostracized woman.

This week there's been a great deal of conversation about the proposed federal budget for 2018 and what government programs and agencies will get a boost in resources or will be cut. In a nutshell, defense spending would increase by \$54 billion and that would be offset by taking money from more than 18 other agencies. Those hit the hardest would be the Departments of Agriculture, Labor, State, and the Environmental Protection Agency. The budget proposal would eliminate future federal support for the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. [7] Some political commentators are saying that all of this represents massive cuts to the arts, science, and the poor. In the midst of this news—we in Christian churches just following along with the Lectionary during Lent, encounter Jesus offering Living Water, abundance, and compassionate understanding to a Samaritan woman on the margins (lonely and ostracized) at Jacob's well. The juxtaposition between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the news this week is staggering. Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly. In our Gospel, that Samaritan woman leaves behind that water jar and runs back to tell those people in her community "come and see." Come and see what this man told me about new life and who he is and who I can be if I follow him. Jesus offers that Living Water still and we can offer his compassion to whoever our society treats as marginalized Samaritans here and now. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] John 4:20, NRSV.

[2] Karoline Lewis, John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries, 53.

[3] Lewis, John, 56.

[4] John 8:11.

[5] John 4:29 and 1:39.

[6] Lewis, John, 64.

[7] Damian Paletta and Steven Mufson, "Trump federal budget 2018: Massive cuts to the arts, science, and the poor," The Washington Post, March 16, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/trump-federal-budget-201...>