

## Come and See! Message for the Third Sunday of Lent

*Based on the Samaritan woman at the well: John 4: 5 – 42 and Nicodemus' Story John 3: 1-32*

Another story from John's gospel this week, the Samaritan woman at the well; one of my favourites. Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well comes after Nicodemus' meeting with Jesus. One of the commentators I read this week<sup>1</sup> did some comparing and contrasting between the two stories, which I thought interesting, and insightful!

Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark of the night. But give him credit, he did seek Jesus out, he was listening and acting upon that inner voice that was urging him on to learn more about this unusual prophet; although he was being cagey, coming to Jesus at night, when no-one would see him.

Jesus meets the woman at the well, in the brightness of the noon sun.

Nicodemus is a man, a Pharisee, a teacher of religion, a leader and very much a part of the Jewish community. He is educated and a member of the Jewish elite -- an "insider" you could say.

The woman at the well is, well, a woman, so would not have been educated, was a Samaritan, and was likely an outsider in her own community. And it is Jesus who reaches out to her, asking for her help to get him a drink of water.

Good Jewish men of the time period never engaged in conversation with women in public. There were rabbinical precepts against this type of public behavior. And to engage with a Samaritan woman, was truly beyond propriety. The Samaritan people were long held rivals of Jews--for centuries actually. Jewish and Samaritan men would have nothing to do with each other, so for Jesus to engage a Samaritan women in conversation would have been an unthinkable crossing of boundaries—never mind even drinking from her water jug or bucket. John even writes "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." (v. 9b) So all who read this story would know how exceptional this behavior was. There is also speculation that she may have been an outcast in her own community, as it would be unusual for a woman to be alone getting water at a well outside of the protection of the village, and at noon. Women's work is to get the water, there is safety in going in groups to get it, and it was gotten usually in the cool of the morning. And for some reason not known to us, she has had 5 husbands prior to her current relationship, and is living with another man to whom she is not married.

The woman at the well is the opposite of Nicodemus in almost every way.

Nicodemus, educated and a teacher, is unable to understand what Jesus is trying to explain to him—he is so stuck in his belief system that he can't seem to get past it to the truths Jesus is trying to bring him to, even though Nicodemus knows and acknowledges that Jesus "comes from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." (John 3.2) And Jesus gently calls him out on it, asking him how it is that he, a teacher of religion doesn't understand. Sometimes our pre-set notions and long held religious beliefs instead of supporting us can actually become the stumbling blocks, holding us back to coming to new realizations and revelations—stop us from growing in our faith, from truly committing to Jesus. But you know, Jesus never stops challenging us to come to a deeper faith in him, like he did with Nicodemus.

In contrast, the woman at the well comes fairly quickly to an understanding of the specialness of Jesus. I'm going to guess this gal was educated in the school of hard knocks; she's no shrinking violet. She questions why Jesus' even speaks with her and then actually challenges him in what is essentially a theological debate, beginning with one of the long held differences in belief between Samaritans and Jews as to which temple is the true place of worship, the one on

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis in Exegetical Perspective for John 4: 5-42 in Feasting on the Word Year A Vol. 2 p. 93

Mount Gerizim in Samaria or the Jewish temple on the mount in Jerusalem<sup>2</sup>. Jesus and a Samaritan woman, debating theology out in the open -- for its time, a truly shocking story; in fact verse 27 say that the disciples were astonished that he was even speaking with her. These societal norms truly didn't matter to Jesus. Even when he tells her that he knows of her past dealings with men, it's not confrontational or critical, it's a simple statement of fact. And then she realizes she is in the company of a prophet. And Jesus' attitude to her is totally non-judgmental – and she an outsider in so very many ways! Hmmm, there's a lesson in that for us, isn't there?! Jesus speaks to her with more patience than he had Nicodemus, and he is respectful.

When Jesus tells her that he would give her living water, she responds respectfully but challenges him back, "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep, Where do you get this living water, are you greater than Jacob?" There is a neat play on words in the Greek in the use of "living" water. Living water meant water that flowed, running freely like in a stream, which was considered purer water than non-moving water, like from a well. So you can appreciate the Samaritan woman's line of questioning: she and Jesus were at a well, no running water here, he asked her for a drink and Jesus doesn't even have a bucket to scoop the water out of the well, so what's he talking about? Jacob, our great ancestor dug this well to give us water, and this man says he's going to give me pure flowing water? And how's that going to happen?

Like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman takes Jesus' comments literally, which seems imminently sensible given the circumstances. She didn't yet know to whom she was speaking! Jesus continues to explain, to stretch her capacity to think, to understand even more!

Jesus promises her water that will quench her thirst once and for all, and the woman, beginning to see that something unusual is happening, says yes, give me that water, so that I will not be thirsty again. Our woman at the well is beginning to sense there was deeper meaning in the words Jesus is saying to her, and she understands that this man is not a regular kind of guy—and she knew men! She recognizes his specialness. Jesus leads her further and deeper in understanding, telling her that God is not confined to one mountain or another, but God is spirit and truth and so can't be contained to one place. God is available to all, and salvation will come not through the Samaritans, but through the Jews. The woman says she knows the Messiah is coming and will reveal all to them. And Jesus says "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Ah, salvation comes through the Jews because Jesus was a Jew.

Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah to, of all people, a Samaritan woman, and a woman who most probably had some pretty tough times in her life, maybe abandoned or rejected by her husbands, family, and her village, a woman who was hardly a pillar of her community, It is to her that Jesus reveals that he is the Saviour, the Messiah for whom her people too were waiting. And she believes. Jesus sees her for who she really is, sees the potential within her—and he reaches out to her. And because of her, an entire community comes to believe. Verses 41 & 42 <sup>41</sup>Many more Samaritans put their faith in Jesus because of what they heard him say. <sup>42</sup>They told the woman, "We no longer have faith in Jesus just because of what you told us. We have heard him ourselves, and we are certain that he is the Savior of the world!" This is remarkable evangelism! This woman—the last person whom the disciples even thought Jesus would talk to becomes the catalyst of for bringing an entire village to faith in the Good News of Christ. Our woman at the well has been filled with the living water that Jesus has provided her, and it's as though the living water of her new faith couldn't be contained. It was welling up within her and spilling out of her. In fact she's in such a hurry to share the experience, to want to share Jesus with others, that she leaves her water jar at the well! "Come and see", she says. She must have been pretty convincing once she got back to town, because many return to the well with her. And then Jesus and the disciples stay with them for two days.

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<sup>2</sup> The Learning Bible, Commentary on John 4: 20, p. 1955

What else can today's gospel story teach us for our world today? Jesus does come to us, and asks us to help him—and it may be in ways which we at first don't see as anything particularly special—like he asked the woman at the well for water. And Jesus comes to us all, regardless of who we are, or what we've done. It matters not to him.

Jesus wants us to engage in faith building activities—to open our minds, our hearts and our souls to new and life giving ways to understand more deeply what faith in Christ may bring. Hanging onto old prejudices, old thinking, closing our mind to new ideas or revelations, to potentially new aha moments can stymie us, actually stop us from growing in our faith, prevent us from coming to a fuller and deeper relationship with Christ, from seeing new opportunities. That's what Jesus was challenging Nicodemus to do, to open his mind to him, to a fuller and more expansive understanding. Nicodemus was actively searching for clarification, wanting to learn more, understand more, but was finding it hard to let go of the old teaching. Each of us has the free will to decide whether to grow or be content to hang onto the comfort of the faith we learned in our younger years.

And Jesus finds opportunities to present these faith growing moments to us, sometimes by a very simple request for our help—like asking for a cup of water. And when we drink from that living water of faith, from the well that never goes empty—the knowledge that Jesus loves us unconditionally, and that is God's free grace that saves us, our cups too will overflow with the ever renewing love of God, we can't help but want to share that love, we will want to help bring others to that love God in Christ. That is what Jesus was doing with Nicodemus and with the woman at the well, bringing them to a fuller understanding of God's saving love. That is the great commission Jesus commands for all those who profess faith in him. That is our mission, our co-mission with Jesus, like the woman at the well, to invite others to "Come and see".

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