

## Sermon – Rev. Jeanyne Slettom

March 15, 2020

### John 4:5-42

4:5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 4:6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 4:7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 4:8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

4:9 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.) 4:10 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." 4:11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

4:12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 4:13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 4:14 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."

4:15 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."

4:16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

4:17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 4:18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

4:19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 4:20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

4:21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 4:22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 4:23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 4:24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

4:25 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."

4:26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

4:27 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?"

4:28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 4:29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

4:30 They left the city and were on their way to him. 4:39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."

4:40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. 4:41 And many more believed because of his word. 4:42 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 Savior of the world."

## Sermon

When I lived in Southern California, I read the *LA Times* daily. It was fun, because you got the hometown view of the entertainment industry, and you got the insider view from actors, directors, and most interesting to me—the writers.

For example, about ten years ago there was an article about TV tropes—you know, repeated patterns in TV shows, like the "Absent-minded Professor" trope or the "Hooker with a Heart of Gold." There's a whole set of tropes in horror films devoted to creepy settings—like the "Abandoned Hospital" trope or the "Ancient Tomb." And—my personal favorite—the "phlebotinum," defined as a "magical substance that may be rubbed on almost anything to cause an effect needed by a plot."

There's a huge website devoted to tropes, started by a fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but the site is so wildly popular that it has expanded from TV tropes to tropes in movies, anime, novels, video games, and even advertising. Any medium that has a story inevitably bumps up against the conventions or devices that pop up repeatedly in storytelling.

Writing scripts is the art of combining these tropes into stories that amuse, teach, and reveal. In some ways, they are a shorthand way to introduce characters to readers. For example, a

chain-smoking character appears with a fedora and a trench coat, and you're ready for a story about a private detective.

All these tropes are organized into a gazillion categories. Not surprisingly, then, there's a category for Jesus, and it is fascinating to see the gospels through the lens of TV tropes. Here's a sampling: there's the "Matter Replicator" trope (loaves and fishes), the "Ragtag Bunch of Misfits" (the disciples), and the "Dying Moment of Awesome"—when a character does something for which they will be remembered forever. (By the way, "Awesome" is a massive category of its own, with multiple sub-categories.)

Actually, TV tropes are not so wide of the mark when it comes to biblical interpretation. Walter Brueggemann, a preeminent biblical scholar, suggests that the Psalms can be understood according to a combination of three tropes: orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Together they form a pattern, a narrative arc that assures the people that, come what may, God is with them. This pattern of God's steadfast presence, even in the most dire situations, has been the basis for centuries of Jewish persistence and hope.

This pattern—the tropes of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation—is discernible in New Testament parables, as well. Jesus begins by orienting his story in the assumptions and beliefs of his listeners. He then disorients them by upsetting the status quo, using his story to pull the rug out from under their complacency. Finally, he reorients them to a new understanding of God, transforming our understanding of who we are and how to live an ethical life.

The woman at the well is one such story, and it operates on multiple levels. It starts at a well, a familiar setting in water-parched Judea. But then it veers quickly from there into disorientation.

First, there is the issue of gender and ethnic boundaries. She is a woman, and strange men and women do not talk to each other in first-century Palestine. She is also a Samaritan, and for reasons too long for this sermon, Jews and Samaritans don't speak to each other. So already Jesus is practicing an inclusivity out of step with conventional behavior. Such overcoming of social boundaries and differences would be disorienting to contemporary listeners.

Then there is the play between literal and metaphorical meaning. Last week, Nicodemus didn't get it. When Jesus spoke metaphorically about being born from above, Nicodemus took it literally and missed the whole point.

This week, the same thing starts to happen—Jesus uses water as a metaphor and at first the woman understands him literally. Then, unlike Nicodemus, she gets it. The water Jesus offers is a metaphor for God's words and work in the world, and Jesus himself is the bucket—the vehicle by which it is known and shared.

This play between the literal and metaphorical then extends to the discussion about God's presence. Is this experienced literally in physical temples? There's the temple in Jerusalem, on Mt. Zion, and the temple that used to be in Samaria, on a different mountain. But Jesus talks about God's presence as not bound to temples but present "in spirit and truth" wherever

people are. If God is everywhere, this profoundly challenges our understanding of ourselves and our communities.

Like the overcoming of boundaries, this constant interplay between the literal and metaphorical is also disorienting. It's meant to be. There's that phrase, "If you always think what you always thought, you'll always get what you always got." It refers to the truism that something has to shake up our habitual thinking to make room for a new idea, a fresh insight, an "aha" moment. In a sense, Jesus is saying again that we cannot live by bread, or by our complacency, alone.

Then there's the part about the five husbands. And my question is this: couldn't this be a further extension of the literal/metaphorical strategy? After metaphorical water and metaphorical worship places, why should the five husbands suddenly be literal? But that's exactly the way this part of the story has been interpreted for centuries. Gee, I wonder why.

Well, for one thing, it's given patriarchal interpreters another story that proves the immorality and sexual licentiousness of women. It's been a pervasive interpretation, setting us all up. Think carefully: have you ever heard or read this story without making a moral judgment against the woman? I've had the song recorded by Peter, Paul, and Mary going through my head all week—"Jesus met the woman at the well." That song isn't a statement; it's an accusation.

But if you go back and read the text, there is no judgment expressed, no accusation, no mention of sin, no call for confession or repentance. Jesus just states a fact: "You've had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your own."

So let's play along with the literalists for a bit. Is immorality the only possible reason in the ancient world for a woman to have had five husbands? Let's see: average age of marriage for a girl in the first century: 12. Average life expectancy: 30. Very few lived past the age of 50. Economic standing of a widow: none. (There's a reason why the prophets repeatedly name widows and orphans as the marginalized and vulnerable members of society.)

So—it is entirely possible that the woman could have lost five husbands to death, divorce, or abandonment. And if that's the case, this is not a morality tale; it's a tragedy. As for her present circumstances? She could be in what's called a Levirate marriage, where a childless woman is married to her deceased husband's brother in order to produce an heir, but technically is not considered the brother's wife.

In other words, there is no reason to assume a scandalous past, and plenty of reasons to consider a heartbreaking present.

If we think of it this way, then something different emerges between Jesus and the woman when he acknowledges her truth and she says, "I see that you are a prophet." "Seeing" is a word that permeates the gospel of John. Is it literal seeing or is this word, too, a metaphor? Throughout the book the word is used to signify belief, but with this sense of disclosure, revelation—seeing beyond the literal façade to some underlying truth. After this kind of seeing,

a person's understanding of self and God is profoundly transformed, and the world never again looks quite the same.

The woman at the well "sees" Jesus because she herself has been seen. In a world where Samaritans have no status with Jews, and women have no status at all, Jesus sees her, speaks to her, recognizes her plight, refers knowingly to her past. He offers her the gift of living water and a God who accepts her as she is. She knows herself as one known and beloved by God. Because Jesus recognizes her, she recognizes him.

Just as it is with the crossing of gender and ethnic boundaries, and just as it is with the interplay of literal and metaphorical meaning, this experience is disorienting, destabilizing her very identity. But it is also profoundly reorienting. She literally goes from being the woman who had five husbands to being, for all time, the woman at the well, the woman who encounters Jesus and is offered living water.

This is not a story about morals; it's a story about identity and mutual recognition. And all those who focus on her husbands are modern-day Nicodemuses who just don't get it. They miss the transformation taking place under their very noses.

By the way, that's why I think that, unlike Nicodemus, who doesn't get it, this woman, who does, has no name. She has no name because she functions metaphorically as *us*. Maybe we should call this the "Meeting Jesus" trope, because she is the means by which the gospel writer offers to all of us the living water of Jesus's teaching. We are invited to this very same encounter, with the expectation that we, too, will "see" Jesus, and that we, too, will be transformed by the encounter.

To be known, truly known, by another can be an unsettling thought. But to be known so deeply that every thought, fear, fantasy, and failing of ours is revealed to another and that other still enfolds us in an unconditional love, beyond the power to describe—that is something we yearn for. *That* is living water. And to experience it would be nothing short of transformative.

The experience would likely be destabilizing, disorienting. It would challenge our very identity. We would have to rethink everything we feel or believe about ourselves, our relationships to others, and to the world. We would, in point of fact, have to *reorient* ourselves in the world, invoking the "Starting a New Life" trope, where, for whatever reason, a character has to leave behind their old life and reorient themselves to a new and different life.

[Pause.]

This year, the season of Lent finds us in profoundly disorienting times. Actions that were once unthinkable from those who hold public office have become commonplace. Our planet is in grave peril. And now, on top of all that, we are in the midst of a global pandemic. As shelves empty of goods, theaters go dark, sporting events are cancelled, and schools and businesses scramble to move their operations online, we find ourselves in a deep state of unease. Given

our current state of health emergency, you might legitimately ask how pertinent is this kind of Bible-based sermon?

When our lives are disrupted and the future holds so much uncertainty, we are in a time of serious disorientation. In such times as this, we reach for reassurance and find it in familiar stories, patterns; in short, *tropes* that by their familiarity remind us of bedrock truths.

- Psalms remind us of the rhythm of orientation, disorientation, reorientation. These texts reassure us that no matter how disruptive these times are, they will be followed by a reorientation to the life that is possible now.
- The parable of the woman at the well reminds us that in the midst of chaotic lives, living water—by definition—does not dry up but is always there for us, a fountain ever springing. The story even assures us that when we cannot worship in person, we still worship in spirit and truth.
- Finally, a major point of the whole New Testament is to remind us that the moment when all seems lost is the moment when God surprises us the most.

That's what the disciples learned after the crucifixion, and they shared it with the world. Call it the "Good News" trope: transformation, living water, new life. So may it be.