

Lent 3A
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
March 12, 2023

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Please pray with me. Holy God, you are the source of all that is good. Be with us now as we consider the words – the Word – in your Holy Scripture. May our meditations be acceptable in your sight, O Lord for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We've talked before about some of the dangers of reading Scripture through a too-familiar lens. A lens that leads us too quickly to a "moral of the story;" A lens beset with myopia – where close things are seen clearly but things further away are not. Sometimes the teachings of Scripture are further away. And sometimes that things that are close are, well, wrong.

We kind of laugh at Eve as the temptress who dragged Adam into sin. But with a more careful read, we see that it wasn't Eve's fault that sin came into the world. It was a whole lot messier than that.

A couple of weeks ago, we heard the account of Jesus in the desert in his days of temptation. And if we settled for the understanding of this story that we may have learned in Sunday School – that Jesus rebuked Satan with words of Scripture – we would have missed the greater point that Jesus was tempted just as we are and God was with him as God is with us.

And we read of the woman with a hemorrhage who touched Jesus' garment and was healed. This woman is depicted as one who comes groveling at Jesus' feet, apologizing for her existence. I rather think that she stood up tall and elbowed her way through the crowds to get to the One who could heal her.

And, of course, there is the "woman caught in adultery" whom we may imagine to be doubled over prostrate in guilt. We don't hear about the "man caught in adultery." What if this woman stood up tall and said to Jesus – yep, this is me. And this is the first man who has dealt with me in love. Was I wrong? Maybe so. Bring it. And then we hear Jesus' words to her accuser, because the man was not accused – let those of you without sin cast the first stone. And her life was changed.

And so too in today's Gospel reading about the woman at the well, the Samaritan woman at the well. Too often this story has been heard as Jesus shaming this woman who had five husbands and the one she is with now is not her husband. Tsk tsk tsk. But please note that Jesus did not speak one word of judgment or condemnation or correction. If this was a woman who slept around, she probably would have been stoned by now.

No. This woman may have been the victim of divorce. Divorce was exclusively the right of the husband – perhaps because he didn't like the way she cooked the carrots. (Suitable grounds according to some of the rabbinical teaching of the time) She may have been widowed more than

once. And given the cultural customs of the time would have been taken into the home of her closest male relative, no marriage required – so, the man she was living with now was not her husband. We get so caught up with the perceived sexuality of the woman that we turn this Gospel account into a veritable soap opera of ancient times.

To grasp, to come to grips with what Jesus is doing here and what the Gospel writer is conveying, we need to understand a few things.

So, consider the geography – Samaria was a region north of Jerusalem and south of Galilee. It was the Northern Kingdom in the good ol’ days. It was the domain of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. It was the land of the unfaithful. And it was conquered by the Assyrians. *Persona non grata* to the Jews. Following the conquest, the tribes of the Northern Kingdom were deported and dispersed. And the land was taken by the conquering powers. The Samaritans were the descendants of non-Jewish colonists from Babylonia, Syria, and elsewhere who were settled in Samaria when the Israelites were deported and sometime before Jesus’ time, the Samaritans worshiped not in Jerusalem as God directed but instead at Mt. Gerizim. Because of their unfaithfulness in worship, and their yielding to foreign idols, the Samaritans were unclean and were to be shunned. But it was even more pronounced than religious practices – this was about an ethnic divide that was very deep – and the hatred that resulted. And, Scripture tells us that it was necessary for Jesus to go there.

Most faithful Jews traveling from Jerusalem to Galilee, for example, would have gone hours or days out of their way to avoid traveling through Samaria. An area delineated by an invisible wall, but a wall nonetheless. And it was necessary for Jesus to go there.

Last week, we encountered Nicodemus . Compare and contrast. He was a man, a man with a name, a Jew and a religious leader at that, comes under cover of darkness. And today we learn of this woman – compare and contrast. She a woman, unnamed, ethnically despised by the Jews, held in contempt, comes in the bright sun of mid-day.

She comes to Jacob’s Well – a veritable “boy meets girl” spot in ancient times – it was at Jacob’s Well that Jacob and Rachel became betrothed – and by the way, Rachel came in the middle of the day yet no aspersions were cast upon her as they were on today’s Samaritan woman. And also Isaac and Rebekah and, some centuries later, Moses and Zipporah. Each of these an iconic love story. No more than this encounter at Jacob’s Well we heard today as Jesus met and interacted with this Samaritan woman.

One marginalized. A woman. A Samaritan. Of no moment. One going about her everyday work.

Do you recall part of Jesus’s words with Nicodemus? For God so loved the world – For God so loved all that God created – For God so loved the cosmos – that the Son was sent not to condemn the world but so that the world might be saved through him. A love story.

It was necessary for Jesus to go to Samaria – it was necessary because God’s love for ALL would be clearly shown and demonstrated as Jesus sat and talked and cared for one who was

among the least, the shunned, one who did not count – and he did this knowing that his disciples would be confounded, the Jewish leaders would be accusatory, and this woman who thirsted for something deep and meaningful in her life – this one would have a changed life.

So consider this—who are the Samaritans in our life. Who are these who we walk on the other side of the street to avoid. Who are these who are just a bridge too far for us to cross to. Who are these indeed. You see, these come to the well. These come and are received and welcomed by Jesus.

And then, Jesus, in his compassionate love, offered the woman living water, the living water that only he can offer and she responded, ‘Sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty again.’”

Like this woman, we too may be thirsty, parched for that which gives meaning to our life, parched for being seen and understood for who we really are, parched for a sense of true identity. Or we may be like Nicodemus – doing reasonably okay in our own right but having some nagging questions and wonderings about how all of this new talk can really be understood.

Come to the well. Come to the living water. Y’all come – ALL of you come. You are not so far away, not so far removed, not so far estranged that God’s love will not reach you and touch you and embrace you and change you.

Change you, perhaps like Nicodemus, who knows this religion stuff very well but still has a restlessness in his spirit. Change you, perhaps like the Samaritan woman who knows that she comes from the wrong side of the tracks and sees no hope but certainly sees her need.

To these and to us Jesus says, I AM – I AM – and I come with living bright tasty water that will become in you a spring of water welling up and overflowing into eternal life.

Jesus was no discriminator because of ethnic identities, of religious proprieties, of social status, of any of the numerous things that we use to define “us” as opposed to “them.” It was necessary for Jesus to go to Samaria because he came for all.

May we go and do likewise, as did the woman at the well – go and proclaim and witness to what we have seen and come to know – SO THAT others may as well.

Thanks be to God. Amen.