

Sermon – Third Sunday of Lent

Scripture Texts: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *Jesus delights to point us beyond the broken and incomplete systems we construct to make sense of God, towards the reality of a God who is bigger and stranger and more complex and more beautiful than we can ever understand.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Discovering new ways of seeing the world
 - a. Joys of learning and teaching non-Euclidean geometry
 - i. Study of parallel lines – like railroad tracks, if the cross bar is at a 90 degree angle with both of the lines, they will never intersect.
 - ii. This was a fundamental reality of the study of geometry for thousands of years, but visionary mathematicians in the 1800's began to recognize that there was a bigger reality.
 - iii. Consider, for example, geometry on the surface of the earth: it's easy to find lines like the prime meridian which are parallel in the sense that they form 90 degree angles with the equator – but these lines will always intersect at the north and south poles.
 - iv. Geometry on a sphere is an example of what we call elliptic geometry, which is strange and different (parallel lines converge, and triangles have more than 180 degrees!), and beautiful. And, it is not the only option – there's also hyperbolic geometry, for which a saddle or a mountain pass makes a good example (and in which parallel lines diverge and triangles have less than 180 degrees).
 - b. These mathematicians discovered (or perhaps helped to create?!) new ways of making sense of the world. It led to an understanding that mathematics – and creation itself – is bigger and stranger and more complex and more beautiful than the old systems or theories made room for.
 - c. For me, that experience is what the journey of faith should be like – this ongoing discovery that God is bigger and stranger and more complex and more beautiful than our old systems and theologies made room for. And, I think, that is what is going on in this (rather long!) Gospel reading today.
2. Worship in Spirit and Truth
 - a. This encounter is no accident:
 - i. You may have noticed that we skipped the first few verses of this chapter (largely necessary with such a long text!).
 - ii. In those verses, John tells us that Jesus had to take the route through Samaria. Remember, the Samaritans are a separate ethnic group, descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel, and are often at odds with the Jewish people of Jesus' time (as indicated by the line that "Jews do not share things in common

- with Samaritans”). Indeed, Jewish folks would generally take longer routes when travelling to avoid going through Samaria.
- iii. His disciples would probably have been at least a little puzzled at that (‘you do know there are Samaritans in Samaria, right??’), but Jesus insisted on this route.
- b. At the same time, this encounter is surprising!
 - i. Not only has Jesus been intentional about associating with a Samaritan, but he strikes up a conversation with a woman. It would have been taboo at the time for an unmarried man to speak with a woman in such circumstances.
 - ii. And, while Jesus ultimately seems to have some special (and perhaps even supernatural?) knowledge of this woman, anyone can see that she is not a model of classic morality. The text notes that this encounter happens at “about noon,” as the woman comes to draw water. But women would generally do this errand at the beginning or end of the day to avoid intense heat and sun. They would also do the errand in company – but she is here by herself at an unfavorable time, apparently to avoid the other women of town.
 - iii. We can see that the woman is startled by Jesus initiating contact when he asks her for a drink. But, even more surprisingly, the woman is willing to clap back at Jesus and to stand up for herself and her people. She has some spunk!
 - c. Jesus welcomes the woman’s challenges.
 - i. Rather than being put off or offended by this woman, which may be what she is hoping for, Jesus draws her deeper into conversation. And things get really interesting when Jesus brings up her messy marital history. (Note: the text doesn’t tell us how Jesus knew this about her. Was it some prophetic, Spirit-given insight? Or had he heard rumors about a woman with five husbands in this town? The text doesn’t even entertain the question.)
 - ii. The woman’s response acknowledges Jesus’ insight, but then seems to swerve to a non-sequitur, speaking about the disagreement between Jews and Samaritans over where and how to worship. But I was fascinated by a commentary that observed how these kinds of disagreements are sometimes used to call into question the validity of religious systems and standards. “Hey, people disagree, no one can be sure...maybe the whole system is missing the point.”
 - iii. The Samaritan woman has good reason to question the religious systems that have allowed ongoing disdain between Jews and Samaritans. Even more, she has reason to question the systems and standards would make her a villain without understanding her circumstances. Commentaries are full of assumptions (without evidence, and by men) that this woman must be a serial adulterer or even a prostitute. However, in the context, I think it was more likely that she had been the victim of vulnerable circumstances, taken advantage of by a series of men who pretended to offer protection and care but instead used her. So, she does have good reason to call into question the validity of the existing religious systems.
 - iv. In response, Jesus agrees that the arguments about where and how to worship – and perhaps the standards which brand a vulnerable woman – are missing the point. While there may have been some value in the past (“we worship

what we know...”), the old systems must give way to a greater reality, to a worship of God that is not bound by place or nationality, but is done in Spirit and truth.

- d. Living water flows where it will
 - i. The Greek for living water refers to water that is flowing or bubbling up from a spring, rather than water in a pool or cistern. It is water from a river, fresh and refreshing.
 - ii. And, this kind of flowing water is not bounded or controlled. It goes where it will, it crosses boundaries, it refreshes whoever is willing to drink from it.
 - iii. Jesus’ offer of living water is not about blaming victims, or even about condemning people for their failures. Rather, it is about offering hope and life to people who are thirsty, who are longing for refreshment and healing, who are willing to encounter a God who is bigger and stranger and more complex and more beautiful than the old systems and standards can recognize.
 - iv. As Jesus declares to the woman, he is the Messiah, God’s long promised king who “will proclaim all things to us.” And, his declaration is ultimately recognized by the woman’s fellow townspeople, many of whom come to believe after spending time of their own with Jesus. As the Gospel writer is trying to show us, Jesus is the one who crosses borders, who shows up in surprising ways, who welcomes people in all their messy circumstances, and who points us to the reality of God’s grace and love – which is always bigger than we can comprehend.

3. Order Matters

- a. We could stop there, but that would be to miss something important about how John’s Gospel tells this story. Order matters in story telling.
- b. My two attempts at teaching courses in geometry
 - i. Historical approach – how people started to recognize non-Euclidean geometries...very interesting to my historical mindset, but didn’t help my students grasp what was going on with these other geometries.
 - ii. Conceptual approach – start with key concepts, regardless where they were introduced in the historical story...led to my students understanding more deeply and experiencing a bit of awe and wonder.
 - iii. The order of presentation sometimes matters a lot!
- c. John’s Gospel plays around with the order of events, seemingly a lot.
 - i. As I mentioned last week, John places Jesus’ cleansing of the temple very early, which differs from the other Gospels.
 - ii. Historically, it seems that this did happen at the end of his ministry, during Holy Week, and that it was a significant factor in the authorities moving to kill him.
 - iii. But, in John’s Gospel, it’s early presentation helps to establish the cosmic scope of Jesus’ ministry (along with the theological treatise of John 1).
- d. The cosmic scope of Jesus’ ministry is further reinforced in the other stories John places at the beginning of the Gospel.
 - i. Conversation with Nicodemus from last week – that God’s salvation is not limited to the descendants of Abraham, but is for the whole world. In Jesus, especially, we see the fulfillment of God’s plan to bless all the world through the calling and blessing of the people of Israel.

- ii. In this week's story of the woman at the well, the offer of living water that flows where it will, and the call for worship in Spirit and Truth.
- e. John's telling places this story right at the beginning of the Gospel, as another confirmation of that cosmic scope. But, even more daringly, this positioning of the story makes the Samaritan woman the first apostle in John's gospel.
 - i. She goes to her people and tells them about her strange and beautiful encounter with Jesus, bringing them to encounter him for themselves.
 - ii. Jesus holds her up as a model to his disciples – she is already doing the work that he is calling and training them to do.
 - iii. Remember, Jesus sought out this encounter to make that point – perhaps in part to make exactly this point.
- f. Our invitation today is to this same kind of work.
 - i. Lent is a time of self-examination and repentance, but not just to dwell in shame. Rather, it is to prepare for the incredible encounter with the Risen Jesus at Easter.
 - ii. In this season, we are like those mathematicians, or like the woman at the well: asking strange and challenging questions, starting to catch a vision of something bigger.
 - iii. Jesus' call of this imperfect Samaritan woman is a reminder that we are also called, in all our own messiness and imperfection.
 - iv. We are called to a wild encounter with the risen Jesus, to continually grasp anew how much bigger and stranger and more complex and more beautiful God truly is. And, as we do so, we are called to share our encounters and our visions with those around us, that they, too, may be swept up in wonder.

Amen.