

Scriptures:
Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:5-42

Salvation at the Well

Sometimes as preachers, priest and ministers we wish we had it as easy as Moses. After all he got a burning bush, tablets with the rules laid out and a staff that turned to a serpent, and produced water from a rock, lucky guy. But then again there is that 40 years wandering through the wilderness never to set foot in the promise land listening to the grumbling all along the way. That part I could do without.

That is just one example of how our scriptures are packed full of messages today it is hard to know where to land. After all with that many words having been read there has to be a lot to digest within them. The gospel story alone quite frankly is a bit overwhelming, what piece of the story do you pick out?

It wouldn't hurt for any of us to be reminded that God gives us living water, flowing out of any circumstance or hardship gushing up to eternal life. All of us need the kind of news that offers life-giving water that sustains us.

Or, perhaps we need to relook at the circumstances of the story of this Samaritan woman. Maybe you've been taught to think she's a loose, sexually immoral, woman who is so lucky to have Jesus' forgiveness. You sat there listening to the story secretly judging her, knowing that she needed forgiveness more than most of us. If so I might ask you where in the passage that forgiveness is offered. This woman is not a sinner in need of forgiveness she is a human being in need of relationship and belonging. Most likely she is on her sixth relationship because she has been left, abandoned perhaps widowed, but most likely divorced "because she was barren, left to fetch water on her own because no one would want her bad luck to rub off on them." So she journey's alone to the place that symbolizes life - the well. She doesn't need forgiveness she needs love and acceptance and that is what Jesus offers, Jesus says, "I will love you" even you. Now that is a story I could sink my teeth into.

And yet as I was reading this week I found it intriguing to learn that likely this story is in this setting because it is all about relationship. The woman is at the well because that is the meeting place, the place of relationship. This is Jacobs well. Throughout the bible when people meet at the well they fall into relationship, even love. Jacob met Rachel at the well. Every afternoon, Rachel watered her flock of sheep at a well near Haran, an outpost of the ancient city of Ur. Wells had a practical use, but in story-telling a well often is a symbol of the feminine and of women's power to produce and nurture life. Looked at realistically, the was the place where young men and women could meet their future marriage partners. The well is the dating place (they might as well be at the local bar). That is probably why it appears the disciples kind of freak out when they see Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman at this well. But Jesus isn't there to

date, he is there to offer grace filled, life-giving relationship. Last week our scripture told us he has come to love the world. To go into the world to the margins that need love and acceptance is what Salvation is all about in the gospel of John.

If you notice in the story our leading lady leaves her water jar behind when she runs back to the village. But what did she really leave behind? She left behind her rejection, her marginalization, her abandonment and she ran back into the village to tell the world about acceptance and love. Jesus gives this woman a new identity - rather than an outcast she becomes a bearer of Good news, of living water, she becomes a witness to I AM. For this Samaritan woman is the first person Jesus tells this truth to. Not the disciples, not the religious authorities, not the pious men, this marginalized woman is the first to be told by Jesus this he is I AM - the God, the one, the holy, the messiah. Now that is pretty interesting stuff. This is when I remember I'm a bit of a bible geek.

And yet, I don't want to talk about any of that I want to talk about the fact that this is the only place in the Gospel of John where Jesus is called saviour. Why is that important? Well to me it is critical, because this is exactly what salvation has come to mean to me. Salvation is found in acceptance, in relationship, in the letting go of differences and barriers and judgements. It is all about grace. Salvation is found in relationship.

And in this story in particular it is found in a rare conversation with two very unlikely characters. Today we are also in a day and age where conversations like this seem rare. In a time where even we 'progressive liberals' are guilty of shutting out the other side. "Jesus suggests that conversation matters for theology." Perhaps this even suggests "conversation is essential for faith... We are living in a time when conversation needs to be cultivated and valued. Practiced and pursued. Longed for and lived. Without real conversation, we lack intimacy and understanding; connection and empathy. Without real conversation, we risk detachment and distance.

No wonder Jesus engages in and insists on conversation when it comes to believing, since believing in John's Gospel is synonymous with relationship. It matters that Jesus' revelation of who he is to her and her realization of who he can be for her happens in conversation. Their conversation is *an example of* what true relationship looks like -- mutuality, reciprocity, and regard."¹

Lets be honest with ourselves, so often we miss this in the church. We are guilty of being just like the grumbling Israelites who have been taken out of slavery. We forget that what we have come from was not perfect and we miss that we are headed towards the promise land. We see nothing but problems. We forget that we are not alone in the journey and so we need a Moses to come forth strike a rock and have the living water flow so that when the question gets asked "Is the Lord among us or not?" we might for a brief moment glimpse an answer of "Yes?"

I want to encourage us to think about this, truly wrestle with it. "The church can *and should* be the place that shows society what *both* theological *and all real* conversation can sound like. *It should be the place where people can come and discover I AM.* The church can be the place that demonstrates how dialogue about faith and the Bible might result in religious respect and tolerance. With this mandate, what does faithful conversation...conversation look like? The

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4839>

dialogue between the Samaritan woman at the well and Jesus provides”² us an outline... of vulnerability, questioning, genuine curiosity, and revelation.

They are both vulnerable, they both have needs. Jesus is physically thirsty and at the same this woman needs the water that only he can provide. What if every theological, every church process conversation began with that kind of vulnerability, that kind of acceptance. Acknowledging that we all have the same needs, we are all thirsty and hungry, we all need the living water.

Fundamentally that is exactly why we are all here or at least it should be.

And then from that place of vulnerability and honesty we can start to ask the questions. **NOT** form our own answers, but open up with genuine curiosity.

Questions that communicate an interest in the other, a longing for information and understanding. “The woman at the well is full of questions, thoughtful questions, questions that matter and lead Jesus to reveal to her who he really is.” She’s the one that brought that out of him, because she took the time to be in conversation, and ultimately that conversation created unique relationship within the two.

How often when we disagree or even simply don’t really understand one another theologically or otherwise do we take the time to really get to know one another? To seek understanding, to take genuine interest? Do we do that? Or do we just grumble and gossip with those on ‘our side’ about the others? Unless we take time we will continue to misunderstand one another. The Samaritan woman is at first confused by Jesus’ offer, but that doesn’t stop her from the dialogue, from discovering who he is.

Go into conversations with an expectation to learn and discover something new.

Do you ever come to church that way? Do you ever go into a conversation that way? This lenten season let me challenge you to expect more. “Expect God to reveal something about God’s self that you have never seen before. The unnamed woman at the well is the first one to whom Jesus reveals his true identity -- I AM, the first absolute I AM in the Gospel of John -- not to the Jewish leaders or to the disciples, but to her, a religious, social, political outsider. This is whom God is for because God loves the world.”

If we were to open up our hearts, thoughts and minds in this way when we came into worship, into conversation, into relationship then we would constantly be changing, growing, learning, transforming. We would stop wandering around grumbling and we would recognize that indeed the Lord is among us and not only is the Holy here and now she is offering us living water, baptism, relationship. God pursues us out of God’s own heart.

The woman at the well in choosing conversation earns a relationship that transforms her into a new person. She goes from shamed to witness. From dismissed to disciple. From alone to being a sheep of Jesus’ own fold. Imagine if that kind of salvation came to each one of us. Let’s start talking so that we too could discover I AM here among us.³ Lets discover ways to come together more deeply than we could ever imagine. Let us also be transformed so that we too can bare

² IBID

³ IBID

witness and offer the life-giving water that we have been given so that all the world may know God's love.

Amen.