

A Lent 3 3.12.23

John 4:5-42

Focus Statement: Jesus shows us the world.

If you were trying to follow along as I was sharing the Gospel, you might have noticed I threw a bit of a curve in there. The assigned lectionary text, the one printed in the bulletin, starts at verse five. I started at verse one though, because I wanted to you to hear an important scene setting detail. “[Jesus] left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.” And from there we get into the heart of the narrative, Jesus in the Samaritan city of Sychar, meeting the woman at the well, you know how it plays out. What I want you to catch here right at the beginning is this one simple sentence, “But he had to go through Samaria.” Because, here’s a key detail you need to know, I can make a case that that sentence right there is what the whole of not only this story but the whole of the incarnation itself rests. “But he had to go through Samaria.”

So let’s talk briefly about Samaria, both geographically and socio-politically, and why it is such a provocative statement for the writer of John to make to say that Jesus had to go there. First off, geographically, Samaria is north to south between Judea and Galilee, but it’s hugging the Mediterranean Sea. The most direct, straight-line route from Jerusalem to the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus did most of his ministry, is along the Jordan River, past the eastern boarder of Samaria. You could travel through Samaria to get between Judea and Galilee, and if you were going from, say Joppa and headed to Tyre or even to Nazareth, that would even make sense. But from Jerusalem, where we know Jesus was coming because just last week, in the chapter before, he was talking to Nicodemus in Jerusalem, to the Sea of Galilee where he spent all his time, to go through Samaria would require a rather arbitrary

detour to the west. It wouldn't have been impossible for him to have traveled through Samaria geographically, but it certainly would have been impractical.

So that's the geography. But then we move on to what really makes the world work, the socio-political situation between the Samaritans and the Jews. Because, guess what friends, not getting along with your neighboring nation is not a modern construct. It is as old as time itself. No one can remember when or why the Samaritans and the Jews started disliking each other. Some scholars posit that the split came during the Babylonian exile, when some Israelites were hauled off to Babylon, while others were left behind. And in the time between exile and return the two groups became so distant as to see themselves as completely different ethnic groups instead of long-separated siblings. Others say the Samaritans were colonists from Assyria, sent to assert Assyrian claims to the land during the reign of Jeroboam. Whatever started the feud is sort of irrelevant, what really matters is the Samaritans and Jews DID NOT like each other, in big capital letters. To the point where, even if the most direct route was straight through Samaria, a Jewish man like Jesus would inevitably cut way to the east, skirting the edges of Samaria and avoiding contact.

All this to say, there was no geographical or socio-political reason for Jesus to have to go through Samaria. But there was a reason. A theological and even more so pedagogical reason. Jesus had to go to Samaria to show his disciples, and us, what he meant when he spoke of "the world."

Last week we heard about the Pharisee Nicodemus, a “leader of the Jews” who “came to Jesus by night” and engaged Jesus in a conversation about what it meant for Jesus to be “a teacher who has come from God.” A conversation which included the well-known line, “for God so loved the world.” “The world,” remember, in the Greek being kosmos, where we get the English for cosmos, the whole of the universe. “For God so loved the world, that God gave God’s only Son, that whoever believed in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” And just to be sure there was no confusion, Jesus went on, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world may be saved through him.” We think we get caught up on the whole condemnation and perishing part, but Jesus, I think, knew that the part we’d really struggle with was the whole what did Jesus mean by “the world” part of it. Which is why immediately following this conversation, Jesus “had to go through Samaria.”

Jesus had to go through Samaria, had to meet the woman at the well, had to talk to her about her five husbands and the man who is now not her husband, had to offer her living water, because Jesus had to show his disciples who the world was, what the world looked like. The world isn’t some pretty, interesting, and fairly esoteric notion like images from the James space telescope that we can look at with awe and wonder and then put away as distant and far from us. The world is messy and present and right next door to us, if we only have the eyes to see and the courage to go.

And what else is messy and amazing and beautiful about Jesus’ interaction with the woman at the well, is as he is showing his disciples “the world” in the face of this woman, he never

makes her a project, never treats her as an example of his ministry. Jesus shows his disciples a vision for ministry where he meets the world as an equal, as a partner, as someone with whom he too can be vulnerable, who is deserving of serving him just as much as he is of serving her.

Jesus came up to the woman at the well and the first thing he said to her was “Give me a drink.” He didn’t lead with I am the Son of God, “whoever believes in me will not perish but will have eternal life.” He didn’t even get into the whole living water thing that’s going to come later. He met her with his own need, his own vulnerability, first. It was noon, it was the heat of the day, he didn’t have a bucket and the well was deep, as the woman will eventually point out to him, and she was his only hope for a drink. Then they get into this conversation about him being a Jewish man and her a Samaritan woman, and everyone who’s hearing this story’s danger radars are blaring, this is not an ok combination of people to be chatting. Then they have this incredibly factual and non-judgmental conversation about her marital history and current status. And somehow, out of all this, Jesus never seems to get a drink of water, but “many Samaritans believed in him because of the woman’s testimony... and said to [her], “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have come to know for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the World.”