

“Right Place at the Right Time”
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
March 12, 2023
John 4:1-30, 39-45
Rev. Jennifer Dunfee

At staff meeting a few weeks ago we had a discussion with differing viewpoints over whether you talk to people sitting next to you on an airplane or we can expand it to a bus, anytime you are in close proximity to someone you don't know. And then we broke it down further, are you likely to initiate that conversation - still a yes for me, are you willing to respond if engaged, or do you do everything in your power to dissuade, maybe even shut down, a conversation attempt?

How you are in the – “sitting right next to someone” scenario might relate to how you are in something like what happens in today's scripture. Two people ostensibly running an errand, doing a daily task of living, where they end up being the only *two* there at the same place at the same time, and without the invention of cell phones to give them a reason not to talk to each other. Much has been made about the woman being there at *noon*, with interpreters suggesting that she went at the time of day when other women *didn't* go because she was an outcast for the five husbands and sixth non-husband partner. Could be. Could also be that she prefers to draw water at noon like I prefer to go to the Giant at 10:00 p.m., easier without the crowds.

We don't know, what we do know, and what matters, is that she is in the right place at the right time and Jesus is already there. I love the implication of verse 4, which says, “now he – he being Jesus - **had** to go through Samaria.” Geographically this is true, that is how you get from Judea to Galilee without crossing the Jordan River. But it is *ultimately* true as well, he had to go through Samaria, because he had some *where* to be - Jacob's well - and some *time* to be there – noon - *so that* he would encounter this woman. Or actually the other way around, since an encounter has an element of coming upon something unexpectedly, *she* would encounter *him*. Only one of them had an unexpected thing happen that day.

Unexpected: Because a Jewish man spoke to her, a Samaritan woman. Because he hadn't brought a bucket to a deep well but spoke of giving living water, gushing up to eternal life. Because he knew *already* a defining part of her story and it didn't seem to make a single bit of difference to him, other than to make her feel known.

Because he said worshipping in Spirit and Truth, was a possibility for everyone, and mattered more than what divided them. Because when she talked of the promises of the coming Messiah, he said “I am.” Because everything in her past – her own story, her community’s history, all the tensions and hardship that might have been there personally and communally, met everything in her hoped for future in this one present moment, actually in this one very present *person*.

So surprising she returns to the city, without her jar but unable to keep a *proverbial lid* on it – her mind and mouth overflowing from her encounter with him. The wonder, the confusion, the awe, the transcendence, the possibility, they are not containable and she is so convincing in what she says – “Come and see” and “Can this be?” that people left their city to go find Jesus just from the witness of her gushing, transformed heart and mind, from this woman testifying as it says in verse 39, a word used by evangelists like John and the disciples.

Come and see. What follows in the NRSV doesn’t get quite it right, “a man who has told me everything I have ever done.” It is like **this** in the Greek: Come and see a man who has told me **all things**, *comma*, everything I have ever done. It is a direct connection to verse 25 when the woman says – “I know that Messiah is coming, when he comes he will proclaim *all things* to us.” Same word. And it is a direct connection back to John Chapter 1, which says in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. **All things** came into being through him. And directly forward to Colossians, that **all things** were created through him and **all things** hold together in him. Same phrase each time.

She is not floored because Jesus played fortune teller, psychic or prophet about her relationship life, she is beginning to believe that she has met the Messiah, in proclamation and creation, of all things. The holder of all things. This includes her, but it is so so much bigger than just her. Can this really be? She can’t prove it, but she also cannot keep it for herself or to herself. Come and see.

Words Jesus himself first said in Chapter 1 to those who would become his disciples. An encounter into an invitation. Not to assent to a set of beliefs, but to start a journey, a way of life to experience. The writer of the gospel of John never uses the word belief or faith,; there are no nouns about this here. John does use the verb believe 98 times. Often connected with becoming, the journey to the heart of God

is always a process of coming to believe *while* on the way *and how* that helps us live this present moment.

This language reminds me of what the theologian and pastor Samuel Wells recently suggested we best say if we want to be evangelists “try this it actually works.” (From “Three Reasons Progressive Christians Shouldn’t Give up on Conversation” by Samuel Wells, Christian Century 7.19.22) Come and see if this way might be for you too. What is it that works for this woman? And then the Samaritans? Those in the 176 year history of this church? Or the new members being introduced today?

Here are a few possibilities from the encounter in today’s scripture alone.

Jesus is not afraid of the part of your story that other people don’t know what to do with it, and he draws you to him through that very part of you.

Jesus can release any narrowness that constrains your heart, perhaps especially when it comes to a person or group across some cultural, ethnic or religious divide.

When no effort of your own could refill your jar as fast as all that empties it, Jesus shows up and speaks of overflowing springs.

In a variety of lonely places, in the words of Meggie Lineberger’s devotion last week, “the water Jesus offers makes a way out of no way, runs deep and leaves marks, and is life-giving.”

Jesus takes his unhurried time with your questions, with what you can’t yet see, and Jesus never tires of inviting you to experiment with your life.

The hardship and challenge of your past and the hope of your future meet in the very present person of Jesus.

The one who brings all things into being is still generating the holy through the ordinary, water becoming in us springs of life eternal.

Or perhaps simply this: At the right place at the right time, Jesus was already there.

And that gives us hope, as we journey to the cross with Jesus, the cross where he **had** to go, that Jesus will *always already* be there.