

**Sermon: At Jacob's Well**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42**

We've been talking lately about how the lectionary often presents readings that complement each other. Today's readings both have something in common which we will get to in a minute. But also notice how John builds his story, using cultural prejudices and history to draw his audience in to the big finish.

In between last week's story about Nicodemus and today, there is a baptism scene set in the Judean countryside. Now, when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he and his disciples were making and baptizing more disciples than John, he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria (John 4:1-4).

Perhaps the best way to describe first-century relations between Jews and Samaritans is this: it was complicated. Things got difficult as far back as when the Assyrians invaded and conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. In Jesus' time, there was a distinct lack of understanding between the two groups, and they may have even forgotten the reasons for it, sort of like the feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys, or between dogs and cats.

The Exodus story is a little simpler. The people were thirsty and complained to Moses about it. Moses cried out to God, saying, 'What am I going to do?'

God said, calmly, 'Take your staff and hit this rock *right here*.' He did, the rock split, and water came out of it. Because of that, Moses called the place Testing and Quarreling, for obvious reasons, saying 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

The woman at the well – Jacob's Well – knew pretty quickly whether the Lord was with her. During her conversation with Jesus, her understanding of his identity progressed from Jew, which was her first impression; to Prophet, after he told her things about herself; to Messiah, because of his proclamations about God; and finally, the whole community sees him as the Savior of the world. The disciples saw him simply as Rabbi.

So, what we have in John's Gospel is a long, somewhat entertaining, story that puts everyone in a good light, pun intended.

The woman came to the well at noon, and Jesus was there, waiting for her. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Both settings represent theological insights. The woman is in Jesus' light whereas Nicodemus was in the dark; we're still not sure if he walked away from Jesus any wiser or not. But the woman sure did.

In this story, Jesus and the disciples are the outsiders, which is one reason why Jesus asked the woman for a drink – it was her well. In the film *Lawrence of Arabia*, one Arab shot another because he took a drink from a well without permission. Jesus will not make that mistake.

And then they start talking about living water, which is where the commonality between the two stories comes in. In both stories, the water is hidden, in this case, underground, in the Deeps. In both stories, when the water emerges, from the well and from the rock, it gives life. The woman understands that she needs the eternal life that Jesus can give more than she needs the water in the well, which she needs very much.

She's not baffled as Nicodemus was; she gets it immediately, and she has no problem telling the entire town about Jesus. And the townspeople believe her testimony without question too. John says 'many Samaritans from that city' possibly because not everyone that lived there was a Samaritan, which was more of a sect than a nationality at this point. But we can see how the faith community is reconciled and brought together, and made bigger, through Jesus.

The problem we sometimes have with this story is in how we project our stereotypes onto it. We hear 'Samaritan' and immediately think 'marginalized group.' John makes the main character a woman and we then expect it to be a sexist story. John tells us she had five husbands and we think she must be a sinner.

It's sometimes easier for us to perpetuate a stereotype than to do some basic research to help clear our thinking. Notice how attitudes shift throughout John's story, and how it contrasts with the Nicodemus story. It's also a very long story filled with lots of detail. Too often today, we go no further than the ten-second sound bite from the evening news, or we read the headline posted on social media without clicking through to get the full story. A good headline can form your opinion for you if you're not careful.

The people in these two stories had the benefit of witnessing for themselves the work of Moses and Jesus. The Israelites in the desert must have thought, ‘Wow; he’s done it again.’ Jesus’ disciples might have thought, ‘Yeah, that’s what he does everywhere we go.’ The task of believing is made easier when we witness it for ourselves, as we’ve said before.

But we have only these written accounts to guide us. And these are not miracle stories. Finding water in the desert is like looking for trouble: if you look for it, you’ll find it. Experienced people know where to find water in the desert, and they know how to get at it when they find it. What Moses did would not surprise them.

Likewise, what Jesus did is something anyone can do. The Bible is full of stories about men meeting women at a well. Moses spoke to seven daughters at a well (Exodus 2). Jacob spoke to Rachel at this very well (Genesis 29). It was not that unusual.

In our story today, it would have been unusual if Jesus and the woman had *not* had a conversation. And by stepping outside their respective comfort zones, Jesus and the woman joined together two parts of the family that had been separated for who knows what reason so long ago. They sat and talked, about their past, their future, and about faith and God.

May we go and do likewise.

Amen.