

In the Name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

Sometimes the story, or history, of a place adds an unspoken importance to events which occur there. In our Gospel narrative today, the 'well of Jacob' is the setting for an encounter Jesus has with a particular woman, and it, the well, reveals both tension and an opportunity for reconciliation. You see, that well, near the present-day city of Nablus on the West Bank, was squarely in the region known as "Samaria". The well is about half-way between the city of Jerusalem and the west coast at the Sea of Galilee, on a route which Jesus takes in this story to return home. Though it is a more direct route, most Jews would have taken the long way around to avoid this region and the people who lived there, for the Samaritans had a long reputation for being untrustworthy and unpredictable, dangerous and immoral. But Jesus, probably to his disciples' dismay, chooses this route to travel as they head home to Galilee.

The problems between the Jews and the Samaritans began nearly a thousand years before, probably in the 10th century before Christ Jesus, when the Kingdom of Israel began to unravel. King David had established its capital, Jerusalem, in the southern territory of Judea, and his son Solomon had polished it up and made it shine, according to the biblical history. A massive new temple was constructed there, served by priests who considered their new structure to be the center of the religious universe, the actual residence of God, while other traditional holy places out in the countryside, like Jacob's Well, were to be ignored and even discredited. From its lofty position at the peak of Mount Zion, Jerusalem looked down its cosmopolitan nose at its provincial northern cousins, judging them to be somehow uncouth and unworthy.

Then, in about 980 BC, the northern region seceded from the kingdom David and Solomon had so lavishly crafted, and established its own capital at Samaria. It wasn't really the principle of the thing, but rather envy and power-struggle and even religious practice which led to the division. By some accounts, the Judeans in Jerusalem weren't all that unhappy to see the northerners go. Good riddance, don't call me, don't even bother to call God from those pathetic chapels out in the sticks. If we have business in the north, we'll take the long way around so we don't even have to look at you, let alone have some need to converse with you. But all those years later, when the political, religious, and cultural division had become cemented, all those years later, Jesus decides to pass through Samaria anyway.

Now, the Samaritans were people of the Torah, the Jewish tradition, too, like the Judeans, but a different sect. Each believed in the eventual coming of a messiah, an anointed one from God who would bring salvation and security. But the Judeans with their temple traditions became devoted to the idea that the messiah would come from the lineage of David, the benefactor of their great capital city, and that the messiah would be a great king like their historical hero. The Samaritans, however, expected the saving messiah to be a link to the ancient traditions of the Patriarchs, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a law-giving hero with the endurance and authority of a Moses. And now Jesus, now knowing himself to be the true Messiah for *all* Jews, must find a way to enlist both the north and the south, both the Samaritans and the Judeans, to come together as his Apostles, to be ones sent from the Israeli homeland into all the gentile world to spread the good news.

And so, while Jesus has sent all twelve disciples off on an errand, the scene is set for this unusual conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well. They are alone there, with no one else to impress, with no one else to back them up. Jesus says "Give me a drink of water" without even so much as a polite 'hello'. It is a command, really, the kind that a pretentious Jew might make

to a commoner like her. And she fires back, How is it that you would expect me to get you a drink? Why would a Samaritan like me do that for the likes of you?! Look at you, you don't even have the sense to bring a bucket to draw water in! And when Jesus offers her living spiritual water, which could satisfy her spiritual thirst forever, she tries to ridicule his offer by saying, Hey, do you think you're better than our ancestor Jacob?! Yeah, if you have some kind of magical water, go ahead and give it to me, so I won't ever have to come back here for more! You expect me to believe that?!

Seeing that he's not getting through to her, Jesus tells her to go get her husband and come back. Perhaps acting a bit insulted, she tells him she has no husband and what business is it of his, anyway? But now Jesus' response becomes 'pastoral', and I think his tone changes. He tells her that he knows she has had five husbands, and that the one with whom she is sharing her life and faith now isn't really a husband, either. She sees his point, for this is the plight of the whole Samaritan nation: they are without a faithful spiritual mate. The story, the history, is this: The Biblical book of 1 Kings 17:30-31 tells us that there were five different foreign groups which settled in the Samaritan region following the separation from Judea, each worshipping their own pagan gods: The Babylonians worshipped Marduk; the people of Cush worshipped Nergal; the men of Avva worshipped Nibhaz and Tartak; the men of Sepharvaim worshipped their city gods; and King Hadad worshipped Anath. Each of these groups intermarried with the Samaritans, and the result was a confusing mosaic of idolatry and immorality. Religious faith in the Samaritan region wasn't just corrupted, it was in near disarray. As the people there divorced one religious tradition after another, effective spirituality of any kind dissipated. So Jesus is confiding in the woman that he understands her situation, her sarcasm, her longing for a refreshingly clear relationship with God.

In this way, the Gospel of John is describing Jesus' tender empathy with the ignored and excluded people of Samaria. The woman at the well is allegorical as well as being a genuine character. The Gospel of John, the fourth gospel, written much later than the other three, often uses a literary device which seems to be allegorical; it speaks of people without naming them, yet developing their storylines and characters so that they become both authentic and symbolic. Did you ever notice that Mary is not mentioned by name in John's gospel? She is only mentioned twice, anyway, and both times she is just referred to as Jesus' unnamed mother. What do you suppose she might be symbolizing? And then there is the sinful woman whom the elders want to stone to death, that's also from John. Jesus sends her off on her way without condemnation, but also without a name. Next week we will read the story, again from John, about the blind man who is healed and, despite orders from the authorities not to, spreads the news that Jesus has the power to work miracles. He is not given a name. The same is true of the invalid at the pool of Siloam, the boy who contributes the loaves and fishes at the feeding of the 5000, and even 'the beloved disciple' who we all think was John himself, but is not given a name. What might each of them symbolize in this Gospel's version of the good news?

The woman at the well, the unnamed woman who might represent all Samaritans in Jesus' ministry, becomes an apostle. She has, by his presence and his close conversation, received his message, his living water, and has gone to her kin and witnessed on his behalf. She herself becomes the vessel by which her family and friends experience the mystery of Christ's refreshment and receive the gift. They, like us, might also be enlisted as apostles, those who are sent forth to spread the good news, as symbols in our own story, or history, setting the scene for revelation of truths. As witnesses to God's blessings, whose testimony is far more important than our own names or identities. As Missionaries who help anyone and everyone in parched places find Christ's living water as we meet them along our road home. Amen.