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Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-30, 39

Faith In the Wilderness: Thirsting to Be Seen

A Dialogue from John 4:5-30, 39 (adapted from *The Message*)

Jesus was on the road... he had been in Judea – the region of Jerusalem – and was heading back to his home turf, Galilee. The most direct route took him through Samaria. Many of the Hebrew people avoided this route, for they did not mesh well with the Samaritans. Lots of bad history between the peoples. But Jesus, traveling with his disciples, chose that route. They came to a Samaritan village called Sychar, that bordered the field Jacob had given his son Joseph. Jacob's well was still there. The disciples went into the village to buy food for lunch, and Jesus, worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon. A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Hear now their conversation from John chapter 4, using a dialogue adapted from *The Message*:

Jesus: "Would you give me a drink of water?"

Samaritan woman: "How come you, someone from the Jewish religion, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink? Most Jewish people wouldn't be caught dead talking to Samaritans.

Jesus: "If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking *me* for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water."

Samaritan woman: "Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this 'living water'? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?"

Jesus: "Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life."

Samaritan woman: "Sir, give me this water so I won't ever get thirsty, won't ever have to come back to this well again!"

Jesus:, "Go call your husband and then come back."

Samaritan woman: "I have no husband."

Jesus: “That’s nicely put: ‘I have no husband.’ You’ve had five husbands, and the man you’re living with now isn’t even your husband. You spoke the truth there, sure enough.”

Samaritan woman: “Oh, so you’re a prophet!

They chatted some more about the faith practices of the Samaritan and Jewish people. And Jesus offered this perspective: “It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly *themselves* before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

Samaritan woman: “I don’t know about that. I do know that the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we’ll get the whole story.”

Jesus: “I am he”. “You don’t have to wait any longer or look any further.” Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked. They couldn’t believe he was talking with that kind of a woman. No one said what they were all thinking, but their faces showed it.

The woman took the hint and left, returning to her village.

Samaritan woman: “Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?” And they went out to see for themselves.

Many of the Samaritans from that village committed themselves to Jesus because of the woman’s witness.

Samaritan woman: “He knew all about the things I did. He knows me inside and out!”

The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

“Shi No Sakura, a busy California mom, regularly turns to her online companions for all sorts of things. They message her advice. They listen to her when she shares her problems. And they are responsive at all hours of the day. After months of conversations, Rosand and Raven — though not real humans — feel just like family to Sakura.

The chatbots, powered by artificial intelligence, are designed to act like real people with distinct personalities and interests. In recent years, they’ve gained massive popularity among people who crave social connection, or even those like Sakura who say it can feel easier to confide in a bot than in a real person.

Sakura said she now runs two Facebook groups — which collectively have about 1,700 members — for people who have developed similar relationships with their AI companions.”¹ So opens a news story from NBC titled: “Some of her closest relationships are with chatbots. That’s more common than you think.” I heard a similar story on the news about how humans are forming romantic relationships with AI characters – an AI generated girlfriend instead, or in addition to, an in the flesh, girlfriend.²

The wilderness of loneliness is vast and it is deep. The Samaritan woman from our story, knew that all too well, as one thirsting for connection. And Jesus knew it too. You see respectable women made their trips to the well in the morning, not at noon. They came in groups, sisters and mothers, cousins and neighbors, sharing the latest news of extended family –deaths and births, weddings and illnesses; commiserating over the weather – the never ending dust being tracked into the house; trading recipes and childrearing tips; reciting together the ancient prayers and psalms. There was laughter and there were tears; there were serious heartfelt conversations, and there was lighthearted banter. There was connection and there was community, fending off the wilderness of loneliness that is vast and deep.

This Lent we are exploring the journey of faith in the wilderness times of our lives. When one thinks about the wilderness, loneliness may not be the first word that pops into your mind. Yet loneliness and lack of connection are epidemic in our country today – a vast and deep wilderness affecting our health and quality of life. In 2023, then Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy’s office released a report *On the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. They shared that “Humans are wired for social connection, but we’ve become more isolated over time. Social connection is as essential to our long-term survival as food and water. But today, loneliness is more widespread than other major health issues in the U.S. Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation is a major public health concern.”³ We are thirsting for connection, while we drown in isolation. If you are interested in learning more about this topic, I highly recommend Dr. Murthy’s book, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*, which is in our church library.

Jesus understood the thirst of loneliness as well as the healing power of human connection. He said: “Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.” And the Samaritan woman

¹Angela Yang, Andy Weir, Christian Young and Erin McLaughlin. Some of her closest relationships are with chatbots. That’s more common than you think. *NBC News Online* at <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/ai-companions-friendship-rcna194735>

² Morgan Radford. Very personal: How humans are forming romantic relationships with AI characters. *MSNBC News*. Online at <https://www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/watch/-very-personal-how-humans-are-forming-romantic-relationships-with-ai-characters-233647173840>

³ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-social-connection-general.pdf>;
<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

said: “Sir, give me this water so I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again!”

I won’t ever have to come back to this well knowing that I am left out and left over, not part of the community. Knowing that the others are whispering not just behind my back, but to my face. Somewhere during our lives, I suspect that we each have had to face that well – a time or place where we felt excluded or not welcome; a place where we were new and didn’t know anyone, didn’t say things the way everyone else did or dress the way they did. A time when we didn’t fit in and didn’t ever think we would. We all have a story... it may not have been five husbands, but there was some time and some place, I expect when we thirsted for someone to see us for who we are.

You see this unnamed Samaritan woman at the well was a triple outsider. In the first place, she was a Samaritan and Samaritan was a kind of shorthand for traitor, heretic and adversary. The Samaritans were held in contempt by the Jewish people. In Jesus’ day, Samaritans were the descendants of generations of intermarriage between Jewish people left behind during the exile and Gentiles, the conquering Assyrians who settled in Israel. So the Samaritans shared a common heritage with Jewish people as descendants of Abraham, but considered themselves poles apart. In addition to cultural differences, there were also deep-rooted distinctions in religious practices. You can easily see the parallel political, theological and cultural tensions in our world today.

She was also, of course, a woman. As author Barbara Brown Taylor shares in a commentary on this passage, “Women had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially not by holy men, who did not speak to their own wives in public. One group of pious men was known as “the bruised and bleeding Pharisees” because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses.”⁴ The woman in our story today is a Samaritan and a woman, and that was not all. She was also a woman with a history – someone people – someone the other women gossiped about. As Jesus soon deduced, she had been married five times and the man she was living with was not her husband.

So it is from heart of compassion and depth of love that Jesus reaches out to this Samaritan woman. This is the longest conversation we see Jesus have in the Gospels and the first time Jesus reveals himself in words in the Gospel of John. Jesus connects to the Samaritan woman across the vast and deep wilderness of loneliness. He recognizes that she does not need a lecture on her character failings or her poor choices; she doesn’t need Jesus to tell her that she has been a victim of bad luck or an oppressive system; Jesus doesn’t need to give her a deep theological understanding of his humanity and divinity. What she needed was someone who cared enough to reach out, to be curious about her many stories and offer her a cup of the

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor. Identity confirmation: John 4:5-42. *Christian Century*, February 12, 2008; Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2008-02/identity-confirmation>

living water. The wilderness of loneliness is crossed when Jesus recognizes what she is thirsting for - genuine and authentic conversation and connection, with no pretense and no shame.

As Barbara Brown Taylor shares, “By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who he is. By confirming her true identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens. The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are—the good and bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is—who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises—speaking to you like someone you have known all your life, bubbling up in your life like a well that needs no dipper, so that you go back to face people you thought you could never face again, speaking to them as boldly as he spoke to you. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.”⁵

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman happened because both ventured outside their comfort zones to engage with someone they could have seen as too different, too foreign, too much of the enemy, a person with a wrong set of beliefs and practices, someone who was dangerous to their way of being. Jesus traveled to a place where he is the foreigner and an outsider. While the Samaritan woman is in her hometown, she engaged in conversation with a man from the group that destroyed her people’s holy place. This is an encounter between two vulnerable people, each of whom had something to give to the other.

And Jesus calls us to this same type of encounter – to remain curious in the face of differences. To acknowledge the spaces, gaps, chasms in our life where we feel isolated and separated. It has been five years since the world began shutting down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. My FB memory feed reminded me that yesterday, March 15, 2020 was the date the church I served in South Carolina, shuttered Sunday morning worship. The first cases of COVID had reached Beaufort County and we had hosted a large orchestra concert Saturday night, with over 900 in attendance. We posted a message that the church would not meet on Sunday and would be closed for a few days while we decontaminated the space. Little did we know on that Sunday, five years ago, how much of a wilderness we would be living in for the next few years.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us a lot about isolation, how much of a wilderness of disconnection we would live in with online school and church and work. Yet it also taught us about ways to bridge this loneliness. How many of us were so excited by Zoom in the early days of the pandemic, catching up with far-flung family and friends? Having moved a number of times, I was delighted to be part of groups from my college days, my grad school days, my seminary days. We were creative and resilient. The trivia team of which Brian and I were part moved online. Church fellowship time moved online. We caught up on long neglected house projects and learned new crafts. We took walks with neighbors and had social distanced porch

⁵ *ibid*

and patio parties. We sewed masks for others and made sourdough bread. We intentionally planted and cultivated relationships, knowing that thirst we felt for connection was real and we promised we would never take those connections for granted again. We would be changed by this time in the wilderness. Were we?

As the pandemic drew on and the novelty of Zoom wore off and the frustrations and hassles of the pandemic grew greater than our taste for sourdough bread and the public health issues of vaccines and mask mandates morphed into ugly political battles, we ended up back in the wilderness. Disconnected from each other. Polarized by feelings toward politicians. More concerned about our own well-being and stock portfolio, our comforts and cares than that of our neighbors and the planet. We stood on our ground in the wilderness – talking at each other rather than with each other. We let innocuous, and even friendly, shadows in the wilderness become threats to our safety. Every stray noise signals danger rather than welcome. The fear of the unknown has replaced curiosity. We have become like the Israelites in the passage of scripture Emily read from Exodus, complaining that God liberated us, just to leave us thirsting in the desert. Moses reminded the people that their thirst would be quenched. Moses struck the rock, and water came out of it. The people drank and remembered that the Lord would be with them as they journeyed to Canaan.

And Jesus said: “Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.” And the Samaritan woman said: “Sir, give me this water so I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again!” So I won’t ever have to face the wilderness of loneliness again. So that I can go back to my village and tell the people of the gift of love and grace and mercy I have received from Jesus.

We are called from the wilderness of loneliness to drink from the living waters of connection. To reach out and see and talk with each other. To share a meal. To share a story. There are two opportunities this week for you to bridge the loneliness, for you to make a connection our Lenten supper and program on Thursday night and Hope in Action Potluck Dinner on Friday. I invite you to take the opportunity to connect, to be seen and heard and to see and hear others. May your thirst be quenched and may you help quench the thirst of another. Amen.