

John 4: 5 – 42

'Assumptions and the Woman at the Well'

Introduction ...

That's a long story – isn't it?

I wasn't quite sure where to start on it – but then read something by Debie Thomas – and so I'm drawing on that this morning.

She wrote:

It's only recently that I've learned to appreciate the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, because it wasn't one of my favourites, growing up. The problem wasn't with the narrative itself; it was with the way the preachers often mistreated its central character. Long before I was old enough to read John's Gospel for myself, I "knew" that the woman at the well was "sensuous", "promiscuous", "unchaste", and "immoral." In some sermons she was described quite explicitly as a prostitute. A "fallen" woman. A harlot. And the grace of the story in this version – the "Good News" – resided in nothing more than Jesus's shocking condescension: "God *even* forgives the sins of *such a woman*."

She continues:

It was only as I began studying the story in preparation for this essay that I noticed what's actually clear in the text: nowhere in the narrative is the Samaritan woman described as promiscuous. Nowhere does Jesus call her a sinner (sexual or otherwise), or tell her (as he tells so many others) to "go and sin no more." This is not a story about morality. It is not a story about Jesus liberating a woman from her own sex life. It is a story about Jesus revealing himself as the Messiah to a fellow human being in whom he sees genuine spiritual hunger, a learned and engaged mind, and a tremendous gift for preaching, evangelism, and apostleship.

So let's begin with what the story actually *is*. **As theologian Barbara Brown Taylor points out, Jesus's dialogue with the woman at the well is his longest recorded conversation in the New Testament. He talks to the Samaritan woman longer than he talks to his twelve disciples, or to his accusers, or even to his own family members. Moreover, she is the first person (and the first ethnic/religious outsider) to whom Jesus reveals his identity in John's Gospel. And – this might be the most compelling fact of all – she is the first believer in any of the Gospels to straightaway become an evangelist, and bring her entire city to a saving knowledge of Jesus. So much for fallen women! How I wish I'd heard *these* bits of the story when I was a little girl.**

I've picked out just two of these for us this morning:

Jesus sees without shaming ...

The conversation between Jesus and the woman pivots when he tells her what he knows about her life: **"You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"**

Of course, this is the "sordid" revelation commentators often point to when they try to make a case for the woman's sexual wantonness. But as Lutheran minister **Nadia Bolz Weber** usefully points out, there are any number of reasons why the Samaritan woman might have the past she has. Perhaps she was married off as a teen bride, then widowed and passed along among her dead husband's brothers, as per the "Levirate marriage" practice of the day. Maybe her **PTO**

various husbands abandon her because she's infertile. Maybe she's a victim of abuse. Maybe she has a disability.

Whatever the case, we know for sure that in the first century, women didn't have the legal power to end their own marriages – the authority to file for divorce rested with men alone.

So there's a great deal we can't know about the woman's history. What we can infer, though, is that she prefers to be invisible. That she does out of her way to avoid the other women in her town. For whatever reason, she doesn't feel that they like her, accept her, or understand her. So she heads to the well in the scorching heat of the day, instead of in the cool of the morning. She hopes to come and go, undetected, carrying around in isolation whatever trauma, wound, sin, fear or desperation her complicated history has left her with.

But then Jesus comes along and sees her. He sees the whole of her. The past. The present. The future. Who she has been. What she yearns for. How she hurts. All that she might become. And he names it all.

But he names it all ***without shaming, castigating or condemning her***. He sees and names the woman in a way that makes her feel not judged, but loved. Not exposed, but shielded. Not diminished, but restored. He doesn't shy away from the painful, ugly, broken stuff in her life. Instead he allows the truth of who she is to come to the surface. **"Let's name what's real,"** he tells her. **"Let's say what IS. No more games. No more smokescreens. No more posturing. I see you for who you are, and I love you. Now see who I am. The Messiah. The one in whom you can find freedom, love, healing, and transformation. Spirit and Truth. Eternal life. Living Water. Drink of me and live."**

During this Lenten season, Jesus invites us to see ourselves and each other through eyes of love, not judgement. Can we, like Jesus, become soft landing places for people who are all alone, carrying stories too heavy to bear? To see brokenness without shaming it is not easy. But it's what we're called to do. Salvation begins with clear, tender, and unconditional seeing.

And secondly: **Jesus honours the woman's proclamation:**

When Jesus tells the Samaritan woman who he is, she leaves her water jar at the well, runs back to the city, and says: **"Come and see a man who told me everything I have done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"**

There's so much to love about this moment. In her excitement, the woman forgets all about her water jar. Her sudden need to share the good news overwhelms her desire to remain anonymous and invisible. Her history – once the source of such pain and secrecy – becomes the evidence she uses to proclaim Jesus's identity. She says: **"Come and see"** recognising that Jesus can't be reduced to a second-hand platitude or formula. She shares her experience of Jesus even though her faith is still young, still forming, still in process. **("He cannot be the Messiah, can he?")** Even her questions become a part of her evangelism. Even her curiosity becomes a tool that arouses the curiosity of others.

Most of all, let's notice that Jesus honours, blesses and validates the woman's proclamation. John writes that Jesus stays in the woman's city for two days, so that everyone who hears her testimony can meet with him directly, and see that the woman is a reliable witness. She, like John the Baptist, like the Apostles, like Mary Magdalene, like Paul, **"prepares the way of the Lord"** – and Jesus encourages her to do so. **"Many Samaritans from that city,"** the Gospel writer tells us, **"believed in him because of the woman's testimony."**

Who is speaking the Good News into your life? How are you receiving their testimony? In the most unlikely places, through the most unexpected voices, from the minds and bodies of the disempowered and the overlooked, the Word of God speaks, and the Living Water flows. During this Lenten season, may we have ears to hear it, hearts to drink it in, and humility to honour and bless its proclamation. **Amen.**

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