

Third Sunday in Lent - Year A

March 23, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Exodus, 17: 1-7; Psalm 95; John 4: 5-42

What was Jesus doing in a Samaritan village? For some reason our assigned gospel today began several verses too late to tell us. Chapter 4 begins with Jesus leaving Judea and threatening Pharisees to start back to Galilee and verse 4 says: "Jesus had to pass through Samaria." Had to pass through Samaria.? Well, actually he could have gone another way. Most Jews did. The land of Palestine is about 120 miles long from north to south. At the time of Jesus, within that 120 miles, there were three definite divisions of territory. Galilee lay in the extreme north; Judea was in the south, and in between was Samaria. The journey from Judea to Galilee could be done in three days if you went straight up through Samaria. The alternate route required crossing the Jordan River in Judea, going up the eastern side of the river and crossing back over when you reached Galilee. This alternative route would take twice as long but most Jews would have taken it just to stay out of Samaritan territory. Yet John tells us "Jesus had to pass through Samaria."¹ We have no further explanation *except* the story that follows.

First century Jews and Samaritans had been divided by centuries of hostilities and prejudice. "They shared a common heritage, each maintaining they were the bearers of the true faith of ancient Israel." But they differed on the site of true Temple worship and other legal and scriptural traditions. To the Jews, "Samaritans were considered heretics, foreigners and unclean" and you were to avoid contact with them. And "Jesus had to pass through Samaria," deliberately crossing ethnic and religious boundaries, stepping passed traditions and prejudices.²

If that weren't enough, Jesus has the longest conversation recorded in any gospel with a Samaritan *woman*. Unrelated women and men didn't converse in public. He speaks to her as a legitimate conversation partner. He listens and speaks. Jesus addresses her

with genuine interest and answers her questions, never speaking down to her. She proves to be quite learned in the beliefs, history and traditions of her Samaritan people. Jesus bypasses yet other customs and taboos. Jesus “had to pass through Samaria.

While biblical commentators and preachers have cast this woman as sexually promiscuous, the text only tells us she had five husbands but it does not tell us why. Was she widowed or trapped in the custom of a levirate marriage, being passed from one male relative to another after a husband’s death? If divorced, bear in mind that divorce was exclusively a male privilege that could be exercised for reasons like no longer finding her appealing or because her cooking was unsatisfactory. In any of these scenarios, she had not devoured husband after husband; she had been devoured by a social system that, for whatever reason, had passed her from man to man to man until she no longer had even the dignity of marriage.³ Neither gospel writer John or Jesus seem concerned with how or why the woman has had five husbands. There is no judgement on the woman’s behavior or character by Jesus. He points to the tragic facts of her life and she does not turn away in shame or anger. Instead, it seems to free her. She calls him a prophet and sees the opportunity to dig into the theological heart of the division between her people and his. Jesus meets people where they are --- at the everyday well, in the struggles and tangles of human life. Jesus seems thirsty to make a meaningful connections across divisions and circumstances. Jesus “had to pass through Samaria” because that is who Jesus is... that’s who God is.

From this detour, a Samaritan woman finds she is strangely captivated by this stranger. She is moved from talking about wells to worship to the promised Messiah. She forgets her water jug — she forgets “business as usual” and her attachment to life as it seemed it would always be. She forgets in her excitement, in her hope to be afraid to speak to the people of her town. She tells them about Jesus and asks, “Can this be the

Messiah?” Meanwhile, back at the well, Jesus is trying to help the disciples understand how spreading God’s Word can feed one’s life. He tells them to be ready to harvest where the Lord has sown, at which point, a swarm of Samaritans come pouring out of the city. They’ve come because of the woman’s testimony and now eagerly want to meet, see and listen to Jesus themselves.

Why did Jesus have to pass through Samaria? The story tells us a great deal. Our Lord has plans to reach out with grace, life and love to all the world. Our Lord wants everyone to be part of God’s kingdom – including those many might disqualify or reject or easily dismiss as unworthy. Jesus models evangelism 101 ---- genuinely meet people where they are, without judgement and talk *with*, not *at*, them. Jesus looks over the shoulders of those original disciples to look at us, “See how the fields are ripe for harvesting....I send you to reap.” Here is where most of us want to squirm and ask Jesus if we might be excused from this evangelism duty because we have a cake in the oven or a very demanding boss, spouse, children, parents, in-laws or because it’s just not our thing.

Accepting no excuses, Jesus points us to the Samaritan woman. As Fred Craddock notes, “She is a witness, but an unlikely witness and not even a thorough witness. “A man who told me all that I ever did” is not exactly a recitation of the Apostles’ Creed. She is not even a convinced witness: “Can this be the Christ?” is literally, “This cannot be the Christ, can it?” Even so, her witness is enough: its invitational (come and see), not judgmental; it is within the range permitted by her experience; it is honest with its own uncertainty; it is for everyone who will hear it. How refreshing. Her witness avoids triumphalism, hawking, someone else’s conclusions, packaged answers to unasked questions, thinly veiled ultimatums and threats of heal, and assumptions of certainty on theological matters”⁴ Perhaps one of the reasons Jesus had to go to Samaria was so we could watch this Samaritan woman’s simple testimony and get an evangelism reality check — Even “faith

that is tentative, full of questions, and not yet mature can bear witness and do so effectively.”⁵

Jesus had to pass through Samaria to bear witness to the unconditional love and dogged persistence of our Lord to rescue and redeem all people, all of creation. Jesus had to pass through Samaria to show us how testimony, lovingly done can change lives. Yes, St. Francis was wise to say, “Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words” yet Jesus had to go to Samaria to remind us that, indeed, sometimes our words are necessary and to remind us to watch for those times we must go to a well, party, park bench, school, barber and unexpectedly find ourselves in conversation with someone who is restless or searching or in need. When that happens, Jesus went to Samaria so we could learn from a local woman to forget our bucket of fear, forget theological jargon, religious cliches or Bible quoting and just share what we know, what we’ve experienced of God’s acceptance, presence or strength. Maybe you’ll talk about a quirky Sunday School teacher whose faithfulness or love has stayed with you or about a time when members of your church came together to help someone, to help you at a difficult time in your life. Maybe you’ll share the feelings you have of God’s love at communion or when the congregation sings a certain hymn or, dare I hope, when you had a meaningful conversation or visit with your pastor. “Those to whom you might speak a word for Jesus will care far more about your real-life experience of your imperfect faith than any deep theological speculation, just like the people of Samaria.”⁶ Jesus had to pass through Samaria” — for the Samaritan woman and village, for the disciples, and God’s very worldwide mission of redemption.... and for you and I. Jesus is good news. Let us share our witness of his grace in our lives — in whatever we do and, yes, sometimes with testimony that speaks from our imperfect yet sincere heart of faith. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 3/21/14

ENDNOTES

1. "Samaria and Our Spiritual Journey" Collected Sermons, Maxie Dunnam, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 0-000-0000-18
2. Portions of this paragraph were taken from Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels by Frances Taylor Gench, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 112
3. "Words, Words, Words..." Whispering The Lyrics, Thomas G. Long, CSS Publishing, 1995, 0-7880-0492-1
4. Fred Craddock, "The Witness at the Well" Christian Century , March 7, 1990, p. 243 as posted on www.christiancentury,
5. Gench, p. 118
6. "Unexpected Evangelist" Collected Sermons, David E. Leininger, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2005, 0-000-0000-16