

A sermon preached at Zion, North Branford

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Text: John 4:5-42

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Here in New England, church-goers are sometimes called the frozen chosen. And this has nothing to do with the blizzards and occasional ice storms we experience. Rather, it has more to do with our reticence when it comes to talking about our faith and even more so, our encounters with God. Besides our regional personality, our western secular culture also holds us back from sharing our stories of the holy. It may be that we just want to avoid possible awkwardness or friction. It may be that we fear being misunderstood or ridiculed.

From what I can tell, encounters with God are just as likely to happen during the ordinary moments of our lives as in more notably religious moments. One of my most powerful encounters with God happened – not while I was at the altar, but while I was at home doing the dishes. Others have told me that God has broken in while they were shopping for vegetables, while they were waiting for someone in a crowd, while they were doing chores, or out for a walk. They weren't particularly seeking God at the time; the initiative was all God's.

The woman at the well who encountered Jesus wasn't there looking for God. She was just there to get some water. Many have speculated that she was there alone at noon because she was ostracized by the others in the village, given her history. But we can't know that for sure. We do know that there was enough about her to prevent a Jewish rabbi from speaking with her.

Jesus ignored several social norms in this encounter. You see, racial and religious tension between Samaritans and Judeans went back as far as the Babylonian exile. And although Samaritans traced their ancestry to Jacob, through the tribe of Joseph, they were also descended from the Assyrians who had once conquered Canaan. They worshiped God, the same God as the Judeans; and they shared the same Scriptures, though they did worship in a different place. Besides this long standing prejudice against Samaritans, it was unheard of for a respected rabbi to engage in conversation with an unaccompanied woman. But Jesus does initiate a conversation with her, beginning with a request that she give him some water to drink. He begins by admitting his thirst and his need of her help, before moving into deeper theological waters.

I wonder how the woman felt when she first approached the well that day. Was she nervous to find that someone else was there? Was she afraid that she would be dismissed or abused? But Jesus bestows upon her such respect and dignity; in asking her for help, in listening to her misfortunes or missteps in marriage-without shock or shaming, and then in speaking to her as an equal. The encounter which she may have dreaded at the outset is instead surprising, refreshing, and healing.

She is so astonished that she leaves her water jar behind as she runs to tell those in her village that she has perhaps met the Messiah. Come and see, she says to them, I have encountered someone who knows everything about me. Could this be the Christ? One encounter with Jesus, and she is transformed from outcast to an apostle. Come and see she tells them.

The story of Jesus with the woman at the well is one of those deep, deep stories of our faith that has so much to give to us. It is in itself a well -of life giving, spiritual teachings. Each time we come to it we can draw new insights; new hope, and new possibilities for engagement with others and for encountering God.

We do not have to be afraid to approach God with what we need; no matter the time or the place, no matter our present circumstances. God does not need to be worshipped only on a particular holy mountain, or in a particular house of worship. God is closer to us than our own breath. We can turn to God throughout the day and offer our prayers of

adoration and thanksgiving, and intercession. And we can engage with God not just with formal words. We can pour out our hearts and talk things over with God as we would with a close friend. God already knows everything you ever did. God already loves and accepts you, just as you are. Come and see.

What is it that you desire from God? What is it that you are thirsty for? Take heart! Remember Jesus' invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will refresh you."ⁱ All of you. Remember the invitation of the woman at the well, who urged her neighbors, Come and see. God is already waiting for you beside deep life giving waters.

That which we receive is what we are to offer to others; a spring of water gushing up to eternal life; respect, dignity, and mercy for every human being, joy, wonder, and care for all of creation. This is how we are to join in God's labor in the world. May we drink deeply today from God's life giving Spirit and bring that good news to all we encounter. Amen.

ⁱⁱ Matt. 11:28