

Sermon
The Third Sunday in Lent
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: EXODUS 17:1-7; PSALM 95; ROMANS 5:1-11; JOHN 4:5-42

I suffer from a bit – ok, more than a bit 😊 – of spatial disorientation. This is particularly obvious when I have to read a map. When I look at a map I see colours and shapes. Squiggly lines. I know that North, South, East and West are a part of it, but North is *never* where I think it should be on the page. When I look at a map I experience a profound sense of disorientation.

We find this thread of disorientation throughout John’s Gospel. This disorientation is particularly obvious in the lectionary readings for Sundays during this Lenten season. Last week, Nicodemus was profoundly confused – disoriented – about how he could possibly be born of water and the spirit. And today, with Jesus’s encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well there is disorientation again. The woman, thinking “Why is this man speaking to me? How does he know everything I have ever done?” The disciples, thinking, “Why is Jesus speaking to this woman?

What must it have been like for the disciples and for those Jesus encountered to witness his earthly ministry, unlike anything they’d seen before? I feel like it might have been a bit like the disorientation I feel when I look at a map.

Consider what had shaped and informed the world at that time: it was all about outside, physical, tangible, measures of worth and meaning. Life was “mapped out” in clear, concrete terms. The map at that time said that a person’s family and life circumstance dictated social status. It said that Jews did not associate with Samaritans. It said that the blind, the lame, the widow, the divorced woman, were outcasts. It said that men didn’t speak to women in public.

Last week I invited to you consider that John’s Gospel is an invitation into a mystical perspective. That it’s about a way of seeing and being in the world that isn’t about formulas, but about a level of consciousness. That it’s about transformation instead of transaction.

John's Gospel shows us that Jesus didn't follow the "map" that dominated in that first-century world. Jesus asked his disciples and those he met not to look at what can be mapped out on a page – rigid formulas, transactions – but to look into eyes and hearts in the world.

We have another invitation today that is part of this mystical perspective that John's Gospel invites us into. It's an invitation to look up from what can be mapped out in clear, concrete terms, and to *enter into conversation*.

That's what today's Gospel passage is: it's a conversation – a holy conversation. A transformative, life-changing conversation that lifts the Samaritan woman out of rigid formulas into growth and movement, and change.

Jesus looked into the eyes of the Samaritan woman and they had a heart-to-heart – a holy – conversation that changed her perspective, and her life and lives of those she invited to "come and see".

A holy conversation. Last week I referred to Cynthia Bourgeault's perspective that Jesus, as well as being the Saviour of the world, is also a wisdom teacher – one sent to dwell among us to perk our consciousness that we might come to know how to live. One sent to dwell among us so that we might know how to pattern our lives and how to enter into a new mode of perception. There is wisdom for us in noticing how the conversation with Jesus and the Samaritan woman unfolds – in noticing certain elements in their conversation.

We hear that Jesus was tired from the journey. And we hear that he has no bucket. Jesus could have found a way to get a drink of water that didn't involve the woman, but he doesn't do that. He makes himself vulnerable to her by asking her for a drink. He enters into relationship by being vulnerable, and by speaking his need to her. This places them on level ground, and because they are on level ground they can interact heart-to-heart. There is wisdom for us, today, in this, in that it shows us that part of holy conversation is levelling the ground and being attentive to the things that create uneven ground such as fear, pride, and harsh judgement.

There is wisdom to be found in noticing that this is the longest recorded conversation in the New Testament. Jesus talks to the Samaritan woman longer than he talks to his twelve disciples, or even to his own family members. And, she is the first person to whom he reveals his identity in John's Gospel when he says to her I've seen you, now see who I am: the Messiah, the one in whom you can find living water that is freedom, love, healing, and transformation.

The reference to living water in this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a play on words in Greek. The phrase refers to water that is flowing rather than still water collected in a cistern, to water that is “fresh rather than stagnant” while at the same time meaning “living,” linking it to the gift of eternal life gushing up in the believer who receives Jesus’ gift.

Holy conversation makes living water, keeping what flows between us fresh and changing. Holy conversation reminds us that life is not about what we know, but about who we know, and how we know one another. It’s about relationship. There is wisdom in this perspective...

The holy conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman begins on level ground, and it stays there because Jesus really sees the woman, and he doesn’t judge what he sees. Too much time has been spent making the Samaritan woman into a “fallen woman”, into an example that “God saves even a woman such as this”.

The woman speaks the truth when she says she has no husband, and Jesus receives that truth, and speaks more truth: that she has had five husbands and that the one she has now is not her husband. The living water in this holy conversation between Jesus and the woman is that there is *no judgement in Jesus’s statement*.

We don’t know why the woman had five husbands. She could have been married off as a teen and widowed, and then passed along among her dead husband’s brothers as was the practice of the day. She might have been abandoned because she was infertile. We know that in the first century women did not have the legal power to end their own marriages: that power rested with men alone. To make her into a “fallen women” distracts and distorts this conversation. Wisdom is to see that Jesus enters into conversation with the woman in a way that makes her feel loved not judged. He allows the truth of who she is to come to the surface and loves her in that truth. This is our call, too, as followers of Jesus. This holy conversation with Jesus freed the woman to leave her water jar and to enter into other holy conversations as she invited others to come and see Jesus.

We are nearly at Holy Week in our Lenten journey. Once again, we will witness Jesus fix his gaze on Jerusalem, on the cross. Bewilderment and disorientation will continue to wind their way through our readings, prayers and

reflection. If we are willing to look with Jesus, to lift our eyes from what can be mapped out, we will see suffering, we will see death, but we will also see transformation. Grace. Resurrection. If we are willing to look up from formulas and transactions into the eyes and hearts of others and of our world and enter into holy conversations, there will be transformation, and living water. I pray that we will all look up, and that in that looking – in those holy conversations – we will witness and experience God’s great love for us, for our world – more than we can ever map out on a page, more than we can ask or imagine. In Jesus name. Amen.