

Exodus 17:1-7 ~ John 4:3-30, 39-42  
**Encountering Jesus: The Samaritan Woman**  
*Where do you get that living water?*  
 Third Sunday in Lent ~ March 15, 2020  
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

***Introduction to the Scripture Lesson:***

“For God so loved the world.” that God became one of us to show us how we can do life differently. That was what we heard Jesus say to Nicodemus who came by night, last Sunday in John 3:16. It seems ironic to me that today, on this first Sunday in our new reality of “social distancing” our assigned lectionary text zooms in to this up close (well within COVID-19 range) and personal, well-lit encounter. What we are about to hear is the longest conversation in the New Testament between Jesus and another human being. The person Jesus is talking to and where it takes place signal how very strange and life-changing it will be. There might as well be warning lights flashing, “Danger” “Look out!” Strange because Jesus has this encounter, not with a man, but with a woman who is alone (unrelated men and women never had private conversations in Jesus’ time). And a woman who is a Samaritan (a sect of people that Jews despised and avoided. And, she is a Samaritan woman with a complicated, spicy history. I use the word “complicated” because her history with men is not necessarily sinful, as some interpreters have surmised, but her history with multiple husbands certainly suggests misfortune, turmoil and trouble.

Having introduced the unnamed person Jesus encounters; I also need to give you some back story about *where* it takes place: in Samaria at Jacob’s Well. There’s more to this detail than meets the eye. Especially for 21<sup>st</sup> century Wisconsinites. First a word about Samaria: verse 4 states, “but he had to go to Samaria.” *Had* to? If your geography of Palestine in New Testament times is a bit rusty trust me, his more direct route would have not included Samaria. The “had to” didn’t really have to do with geography. Why did he *have to* go through Samaria then? Given that we are in the Gospel of John, perhaps it was in order to have the encounter we are about to hear. But why the detail about the well? Tired, thirsty Jesus sat down at Jacob’s well. Yes, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel Jacob. And yes, this is very near the sacred land of Shechem where Joshua renewed the covenant, back in the days *before* the Kingdom of Israel was divided, back when the Samaritans were not despised by the Jews, but were actually a part of the twelve tribes of Israel. The history of this soil recalls renewal and generativity.

But there’s one more juicy aspect to the backstory: Jesus meeting a woman alone at a well (we’re told his disciples had left him alone there to get food). For the original hearers they would immediately recognize this familiar motif for courtship. In Bible times, a well was the place where you meet strangers, people who were not from your family or tribe, the place where your life could be changed in an instant. Kind of like the scene, “A Winter’s Ball” in the musical “Hamilton,” where Alexander Hamilton asks Angelica, “Where are you taking me?” And she says, “I’m about to change your life.” Hamilton replies, “Then by all means, lead the way.” And then Eliza introduces herself, “Elizabeth Schuyler. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” As we know, the meeting at the Winter’s Ball, did change their lives, Eliza became Hamilton’s wife. That was early in our country’s history, about 200 years ago. Over 2000 years ago, in Jesus’ time, before balls or malls, way before Tinder or Match.com, there were wells. Jacob, Moses, Saul all had their significant, life-changing well encounters. Setting Jesus down at a well by himself where a woman comes along to draw water. That would have raised everyone’s eyebrows and heart rate. A familiar set up, but certainly with a new and different twist to it.

So here we are in Samaria, at Jacob’s Well, with tired, thirsty Jesus sitting there, in the heat of the day. It’s “High Noon” (Now there’s an American Western movie motif we could throw in). Along comes a

Samaritan Woman to draw water. I've set the scene. Let's see what living water we can draw from this story, here on this day of March as we thirst for hope. I invite you to draw from our deep wellspring of eternal and abiding truth that can guide and sustain us through these days that seem so strange.

### Sermon

"Heavy boots." What a hard week this had been. Every day, sometimes every hour news, questions, frustrations, confusion. I'm pretty sure that many of us walked in here today with "heavy boots." This is the expression that nine-year old Oskar Schell, in Jonathan Safran Foer's novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, uses to describe his grief over the death of his father who died in the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001. Grief too deep for words over the loss of his world as he knew it. Oskar says, "I desperately wish I had my tambourine with me now, because even after everything I'm still wearing heavy boots, and sometimes it helps to play a good beat."<sup>i</sup>

What about us? Along with our own personal trials and troubles, across the land our collective boots got heavier with more and more news of the COVID-19 outbreak becoming a pandemic, Governor Tony Evers declaring Wisconsin in a State of Emergency, and then President Trump declaring a national emergency. What comes next? What should we do? Heavy Boots abound: Around the world, across our country, and right here in our families and friends. Along with the discouraged and thirsty Israelites in the desert we may ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Along with the Samaritan Woman, we may be asking, "Where do you get that Living Water?" The water that you say, "becomes a spring of water gushing up," this Water that promises life and lift to counteract this deadening heaviness? Water that will wash away the virus of confusion, political animosity, and panic. Yes, where is this water? We'd like some, now.

If you are thirsty for a better way to navigate in the midst of the current confusion, calamity, and chaos; if you would like to wash away the barriers that divide and destroy; if you are mired in a stuck relationship, or intractable situation, this story, this pivot point in the life of one woman, her community, and even Jesus. This story has an answer for us. It's right there between the lines. "Where do you get that living water?" *From the person you have not been listening to.* Stay with me, and I will show you what I mean. We'll start with our scripture lesson of the longest conversation. Keep in mind that the word "conversation" at its root means, "to turn [*versatio*] together [*con*]." So when someone gives you that look and says, "we need to have a conversation" because they're getting ready to break up with you, fire you, or tell you why you shouldn't vote for the candidate you like: they are not really starting a true conversation. They are about to tell you something you don't want to hear. That is not a conversation.

When two people or two parties have an actual conversation, they both listen to one another, they both speak: in spirit and in truth. Neither one is silenced. Neither one shuts down. Neither one storms off. Neither one resorts to eye rollage. Yes: a hard conversation where you do not agree will be awkward, uncertain, frustrating. Yet in that difficult exchange, if it becomes a real conversation, both are changed. Both "turn together," or you could say: together, they help each other to make a turn. However slight. As much as we resist this kind of conversation: heavy boots are lightened. Springs of Living Water gush up, or at least start to trickle. Living Water, waiting to be drawn from the well of a person you have not been listening to. Let's see how this works in two different conversations: with Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well, and with Oskar Schell and Mr. Black, in Manhattan, in 2001.

We will start with Jesus and the Samaritan Woman. The narrator tells us that Jesus is tired, thirsty, and hungry. Had and his disciples had left Judea under pressure on their way back home to Galilee traveling the more direct route through Samaria, a stretch of territory where they would be despised just for being Jews. Kind of like African Americans in the 1950's having to make a road trip through the Jim

Crow South, or like Muslims traveling through the Midwest in traditional clothing on their way to a wedding the week after 9/11. Their skin color and or their clothes making them targets in a region where they were not welcome. And along comes a local woman to draw water. The conversation begins with Jesus' request: "Give me a drink." And opens into a conversation when she responds with a question stating the obvious and the strangeness of his request: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Jesus was breaking multiple barriers with his request. And she responded with honesty, curiosity, and presence. From there Jesus took it to the next level by introducing the idea of Living Water. And she chooses to stay in the conversation, even as it continues to go underneath the surface.

The most remarkable turn in this dialogue is when Jesus says, "Go, call your husband, and come back," and she hangs in there with her honesty, curiosity and presence. *Rather* than getting intimidated, being silenced, or turning defensive in the presence of this man who is starting to seem like a prophet: she chose to continue awkwardly, now vulnerable realizing that he knows all about her. And Jesus affirms her honesty. "You are right in saying, "I have no husband." He does not judge her or condemn her for her questionable situation. Jesus does not let her "complications" define her. Nor does she let his strange and extraordinary powers shut her down.

By the end of this "boot lightening" conversation, we see her change from a tired, routine-bound, voiceless, faceless, town-pariah, to a woman literally springing forth from the well, running into town without her water jar. Now she is using her voice full volume to bear witness. It's almost like she has become the bucket! She is delivering the Living Water to the very community she was trying to avoid only moments earlier. Isn't this crazy: She is the first evangelist in John's gospel! And a successful one, at that. She brings other Samaritans running to see this Jewish man who just might be the Messiah. And in two days' time, we are told the whole Samaritan community of Sychar, has proclaimed Jesus is "truly the Savior of the World."

Jesus was also moved by this conversation. The woman's candor and spunk, her refusal to get defensive, her deep questions about worship and tradition catalyzed a conversation that led to Jesus' first self-reveal in the Gospel of John. Of all the people and places he could have done this, Jesus chose to tell this outcast woman at Jacob's Well, who he really was: "I am the Messiah, the one who is speaking to you." He also changed his plans: Sychar was no longer a quick "fly over" stop. Instead, he accepted the invitation and hospitality of these foreigners for what turned into a two-day tent-revival, so to speak.

Now let's go to New York City, for the second conversation between two strangers in an unlikely convergence. This one is between a young nine-year-old boy and a very old man: two strangers, from different worlds, yet living only one floor apart. Oskar is knocking on the apartment door, 6a, of Mr. Black. He is on his quest to find the lock that matches the mysterious key that belonged to his now deceased father. Oskar writes: "*He led me to the kitchen table, which was where our kitchen table was, and he sat down and slapped his hand against his knee. 'Well!' he said, so loudly that I wanted to cover my ears. 'I've had a pretty amazing life! .I was born on January 1, 1900! I lived every day of the twentieth century! So many people enter and leave your life! Hundreds of thousands of people! You have to keep the door open so they can come in! But it also means you have to let them go!*"

*I do when Mom finds out about something I did that I shouldn't have done. 'I've been reading your lips!' What? He pointed at his hearing aids, which I hadn't noticed before, even though I was trying as hard as I could to notice everything. 'I turned them off a long time ago!' 'You turned them off?' 'A long, long time ago!' 'On purpose?' 'I thought I'd save the batteries!' For what? He shrugged his shoulders. 'But don't*

*you want to hear things?’ He shrugged his shoulders again, in a way so I couldn’t tell if he was saying yes or no. And then I thought of something else. Something beautiful. Something true. ‘Do you want me to turn them on for you?’*

*He looked at me and through me at the same time, like I was a stained-glass window. I asked again, moving my lips slowly and carefully so I could be sure he understood me: ‘Do. You. Want. Me. To. Turn. Them. On. For. You?’ He kept looking at me. I asked again. He said, ‘I don’t know how to say yes!’ I told him, “You don’t have to.” I went behind him and saw a tiny dial on the back of each of his hearing aids. “Do it slowly! He said, almost like he was begging me. “It’s been a long, long time!”*

*I went back around ‘My wife and I renovated this kitchen ourselves! With these hands!’ He showed me his hands... ‘Where’s your wife now?’, ‘Oh, he said, she died twenty-four years ago!’ ‘Long time ago!’ ‘Yesterday, in my life!’ ‘Oops.’ It’s OK.’ ‘You don’t feel bad that I asked about her? You can tell me if you do.’ “No!” he said. Thinking about her is the next best thing!’ He poured two cups of tea. ‘Do you have any coffee?’ I asked. ‘Coffee!’ ‘It stunts my growth, and I’m afraid of death.’ He slapped the table and said, ‘My boy, I have some coffee from Honduras that’s got your name on it!” But you don’t even know my name.’...*

*‘I haven’t left the apartment in twenty-four years!’ ‘What do you mean?’ ‘Sadly, my boy, I mean exactly what I said! I haven’t left the apartment in twenty-four years. My feet haven’t touched the ground!’ Why not?’ There hasn’t been any reason to!’ ... Don’t you miss the world?’ “I do! Very much!’ My boots were so heavy that I was glad there was a column underneath us. How could such a lonely person have been living so close to me my whole life? If I had known, I would have gone up to keep him company. Or I would have made some jewelry for him. Or told him hilarious jokes. Or given him a private tambourine concert...*

*And then all of a sudden I thought of something. Something enormous. Something wonderful. ‘Do you want to help me?’ ‘Excuse me?’ ‘With the key.’ ‘Help you!’ ‘You could go around with me.’ ‘You want my help!’ ‘Yes.’...I said I didn’t want him to feel forced. I told him about the 162 million locks, and how the search would probably take a long time... I asked him, ‘Do you have a decision?’ He didn’t say anything. ‘What do you think, Mr. Black?’ I tapped him on the shoulder and he looked up suddenly.*

*‘Hello?’ He smiled, like to his front so he could see my lips, and I promised him I would be as gentle as I could. Then I went back behind him and turned the dials extremely slowly, a few millimeters at a time... We looked at each other. Then, out of nowhere, a flock of birds flew by the window, extremely fast and incredibly close. Maybe twenty of them. Maybe more. But they also seemed like just one bird, because somehow they all knew exactly what to do. Mr. Black grabbed at his ears and made a bunch of weird sounds. He started crying—not out of happiness, I could tell, but not out of sadness, either. ‘Are you OK?’ I whispered. The sound of my voice made him cry more, and he nodded his head yes.<sup>ii</sup>*

Where do you get that Living Water? Listen to Jesus. Take a page from his book. Turn on those hearing aids. And let’s start listening and talking, let’s start conversing, like we never have before. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. New York: (Houghton: New York, NY, 2005), p. 2

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, selected passages from pp.162-168.