



“HER STRENGTH, HER STORY”
SCRIPTURE: JOHN 4: 5-42
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
LIVE STREAMED WORSHIP #1
March 15, 2020
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John 4:5-42

4:5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

4:6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

4:7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

4:8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

4:9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

4:10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

4:11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

4:12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

4:13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,

4:14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

4:15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

4:16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

4:17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';

4:18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

4:19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet.

4:20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

4:21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

4:22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

4:23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.

4:24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

4:25 The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

4:26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

4:27 Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"

4:28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,

4:29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

4:30 They left the city and were on their way to him.

4:31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something."

4:32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."

4:33 So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?"

4:34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.

4:35 Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.

4:36 The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

4:37 For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.'

4:38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

4:39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."

4:40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

4:41 And many more believed because of his word.

4:42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

We don't know her name. Only that she is a Samaritan. She is anonymous because of the patriarchy. She's anonymous because that's what history often takes from women—identity. She is marked and labeled in all kinds of ways, but the bottom line is she is a worker in an area where Jesus really shouldn't have been.

Her story is our story—the story of a country and a culture gripped by religious and cultural tension, even hatred and violence, a country and a culture that holds the generational wounds of Empire, a country unaccustomed to a truth teller the likes of Jesus.

Her daily work is hard—something most women of her time probably would say about their days. She carries water for her family, for her community. She sees to necessities, life-giving and life-sustaining necessities. And she carries the weight of the world in her body.

We can read only the remnants of her story—obscured by patriarchal interpretations and by the colonization of Christian narratives and doctrines by Empire. She sees first hand how stuck in these broken systems and mentalities her country and her culture are.

The remarkable thing about this Samaritan woman is that in the midst of her daily labor and her worry, she is moved to engage in a conversation with a total stranger because she knows something has got to change. She knows that change only comes when we tell the truth and when we do whatever we can to create solidarity in the human race.

This Samaritan woman tells the story of religious strife, conflict about what and where is sacred. She tells the story of laws that move women from man to man like property. She tells the story of cultural tension and relational brokenness. She tells the story of forbidden conversations, of countless conversations that never happened because of fear, because of power, because of mistrust.

She tells us her story because she wants things to change. Her heartbreak spurs her to believe that things can and should change. The Samaritan woman is our sister, she is our mother, she is our friend. She is wise, she is determined, and she is strong.

We don't know her name either.¹ Only that she is an American. She is anonymous because of the economy. She's anonymous so she can keep her job—she's a nurse in a hospital in the United States. Her story is our story—the story of a country and a culture fractured by structures that are built around short term financial gains for the few, instead of long term economic justice for all, a country and a culture fractured by generations of colonized lands and colonized minds, a country and a culture unprepared for a global pandemic.

Her daily work is hard and rewarding—something many nurses would probably say about their days. But the last several days have brought on a different breed of stress and danger for her and many health care workers around the country. They are seeing first hand how hospitals and health systems are seemingly caught off guard by the magnitude of the novel Coronavirus that is locking down whole countries around the world.

The remarkable thing about this nurse is that in the midst of it all, she is moved to share her story with total strangers because she knows something has got to change. She knows that change only comes when we tell the truth and when we do whatever we can to create solidarity in the human race.

This American woman tells the story of no isolation protocols, inadequate protective equipment, exposed workers and family members, employees not informed of suspected cases of the virus, of hospital economies and health care economies built for profit not for people, of practices and mentalities that endanger the larger community by enabling the virus to spread.

She tells us her story because she wants things to change. Her heartbreak spurs her to believe that things can and should change. This American woman is our sister, she is our mother, she is our friend. She is wise, she is determined, and she is strong.

It is a strange gift to have these two women's strength, these two women's stories come together on this Sunday of all Sundays.

I've preached on the woman at the well many, many times. Hers is a story of two people crossing the chasm of social convention and cultural biases to literally come physically closer to each other.

Jesus shouldn't have been there in Samaria as a Jew. Jews and Samaritans were enemies from way back. Jesus shouldn't have been talking to her, a woman. That was forbidden and yet, he strikes up a conversation. It's a story of proximity, of human contact, of face to face transformation. It's a story of how Jesus comes close and truly sees people.

And because he sees this Samaritan women, because of their connection, she goes and tells people. She engages with people face to face to tell them what has happened to her. It's a story of crowds of people coming together and being changed forever. It is a story of people coming together who wouldn't normally be together in order for their community, their country, their world to have a fighting chance at being well.

And here I am preaching in a sanctuary with empty pews—pews normally full of people in proximity to each other. No face to face worship for two weeks—I have written that and said that so many times since Thursday. Here we are in a place normally so full of life-giving energy, so full of joy and the beautiful things that happen when we come together, bodies together, as a family of faith, in a space now that echoes with an eerie emptiness.

It feels strange to have a story of two bodies coming closer, of two bodies bridging a divide to truly see each other—on a Sunday when we are learning a new survival skill called social distancing.

We are hearing Jesus' story about two people coming together to change the world, on a Sunday where we are learning to put space between us to change the world. On a Sunday when we can't see each other face to face because it is distance, not proximity, that will help our community and our country and our world have a fighting chance to be well.

This strange conflation of stories about bodies together in space and bodies separated to make space is how God is speaking to us today in this unprecedented

moment, in this desert wandering we could not have imagined just two weeks ago when our Lenten journey began.

Jesus tells the Samaritan woman about the living water gushing up inside of her, quenching her deepest thirst. And we turn on the faucet for the repetitive hand washing we're doing these days. Water going down the drain to wash something away that can harm us. And water gushing up inside of us to fill us with something that can heal us.

Jesus uses proximity to bodies to be prophetic—to call the world to come home to itself. It is proximity to forbidden bodies that teaches us we are one big human family.

And today it is distance between bodies that is prophetic—a call for the world to come home to ourselves. Today it is distance between us that teaches the world what we too easily forget, that we are one big human family—deeply connected on in every layer of our existence.

The distance between us today is about love—love that can change things.

The Coronavirus is not about some people who have the virus, it is the world's virus—a shared reality that is waking us up again to the truth about ourselves.

The stupor of Western individualism has diminished our world. We are not individuals, we are family—we share germs and we share oxygen, we share resources and we share scarcity, we share hopes and dreams and we share fears and anxiety.

The distance between us today will not make this virus disappear, but it will slow it down, it will save lives and stabilize communities. It will give medical workers a way to deal with this pandemic more effectively over time. It will give our unprepared country a chance to come together and figure out what we need to do to take care of each other. It will give scientists and researchers more time to develop treatments and vaccines.

It will give us all time to do some deep healing work—to change direction from the wayward journey we've been on, to get back on a more truthful path about who we are in this world together.

This distance between us may just be what God uses to bring us closer to each other. Our world needs that to happen in order to survive.

Can we take time to notice what it feels like to slow down, for the fevered frenzy of life to collectively pause—you know in China the skies are clearing, you know in

Italy neighbors are singing to each other, you know in Iran doctors are dancing to lift their patient's spirits.

Distance may seem like a strange way to heal our broken relationships, but God has never shied away from the unconventional.

Just ask the Samaritan woman at the borderlands of her country's struggle to find healing. Her strength, her story comes from disintegration of social boundaries, defiance of social conventions, from dismantling patriarchy and Empire, from believing people are not commodities, but that the weight of the world is much more bearable when we more evenly distribute the load.

Just ask the American woman on the front lines of our country's struggle to find healing. Her strength, her story comes from listening to her social conscience, from caring about her patients and her colleagues and her communities, from believing that people are not commodities, and that the health and well being of one is the same thing as the health and well being of all.

Their stories are our stories—the story of a human family that has too long let itself be misled about who we really are in the great scheme of things. Our story, our strength is in our shared past, present, and future.

Let these women teach us again that change only comes when we tell the truth and do whatever we can to create solidarity in the human race.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/14/dispatch-from-an-american-nurse-on-the-frontlines-of-the-effort-to-contain-coronavirus/>