

Third Sunday in Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
12 March 2023

John 4:5-42

There is an old adage that comes from Psychology which says that “healing comes from the telling and the re-telling of our story.” Likewise, culture, faith, values, and the identifying marks of a culture or a group are transmitted from generation to generation through stories. Stories define us, remind us of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. Stories give us a sense of place and an identity. Our collective history as a nation is wrapped up in stories about George Washington, cowboys and Indians, the Civil War, the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, the 60's, the Civil Rights Movement, Desegregation, the rise of the Christian Right, 9/11, the war on terror, hurricane Katrina and Harvey (and many others,) the rise of populism, etc.

Our own family history is always passed down from one generation to the next through stories about joys and accomplishments, loss and pain, deep family secrets, births and miscarriages, first loves, illness and recovery, and the majesty and frailty of life. The same is true of this Church. We pass our stories from one congregation to the next congregation through stories about former vestries, former clergy, building expansions, the burials of our founders, etc. In short, we all have a story and this story tells us who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.

As Christians we have the greatest story ever told. We have the Biblical story which is the testament of how God has dealt with us since the beginning of the universe. This story tells us about a Creator God who chooses a nation for himself by setting aside Abraham's family. It tells us of a liberator God who rescues his people from Egypt at their lowest time in history. It tells us of a loving God who protected his nation in the desert and guided them to a promised land through the ministry of Moses, Aaron, Myriam, and Joshua. It tells us of Judges and Kings who protected the nation and advanced its borders. It tells us about prophets and priests, exile and restoration, and finally, Jesus of Nazareth and his church. Unfortunately, according to the Pew Center Global Religious Futures Project, “The percentage of American adults who identify as Christian has been declining each year, while the share who do not identify with any religion has been rising rapidly.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/>).

A subsection of this study tells us about religious knowledge by most Christians around the world. This too is becoming smaller every year. Many Christians are uneducated on the basic stories of our faith. Atheists and agnostics scored higher than Christians on the basic narratives of the Bible. Ironically, the scores were much worse in the Bible-belt than anywhere else. Many Southerners believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's

wife, Deuteronomy is a Rock music group, Genesis tells the story of Abraham Lincoln, King David ruled England, and John the Baptist founded the Southern Baptist Church. Today at Jacob's well we see the encounter of an old story and a new story.

Today, we have the clash of two stories in John 4: 5-42. This is the famous interaction between Jesus of Nazareth and a Samaritan Woman at Jacob's well. Let us look at the story of the Samaritan woman first: Women are subservient to men, it is improper for them to be unaccompanied in public, it is dishonorable for them to speak to a man in public, it is a sign of a sinful life to be in the marketplace without their husband or father after sundown, their only purpose in life is to serve men, they are not to look at a man in the eye, they are to mind their manners and their place, etc. In terms of the Samaritan culture, the story goes like this: Samaritans don't have dealings with Jews, they worship in the mountains and not in the Jerusalem temple, most Jews think of them as outside God's promises to Israel, they are considered by Jews to be unclean and unrighteous and no better than Gentiles. No one would expect or even imagine that there could ever be an interaction between this woman and Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus brings a new story into the picture, however. The story goes like this: First, in God's eyes there is no longer male and female and this woman has the right to speak to me, to look me in the eye, and to challenge me. Second, God has chosen to extend the promises made to Israel to people everywhere. The time has come for believers to worship God in truth and spirit, in every place and at every occasion, even when not at the Temple in Jerusalem, and even when not able to offer sacrifices. A contrite and God-directed spirit is more important than any sacrifice. Third, whereas in the old story the Law was the way to truth and righteousness, in the new story, Jesus is the Truth, the Way, and the Life. He is the Messiah, the Savior of the World. Fourth, Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. The Samaritan is a woman with a past and Jesus accepts her as she is and offers her a future. She too, even though she is considered by most to be a sinner, can have eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord. She too can have the living water God offers those who believe in him. She too can have liberation, forgiveness, restoration, and salvation. She fits within the new story. In fact she is the very person for whom Christ Jesus came into the world and for whom he died on the cross. Although this poor woman had no status, little worth in the eyes of the world, and no hope of ever achieving spiritual righteousness, in the new story Jesus introduces into her life, she is elevated to the status of Child of God, she is accepted as she is, she is loved as she is, and she is saved as she is. All she has to do is to believe.

My friends the Samaritan woman's story is our story as well. Jesus breaks into our own particular world every day and offers us his living water, not because we deserve this living water, but because he loves deeply and because he seeks to have a relationship with us. We all have a past. We all have deeply rooted secrets. Our failures tend to determine many of our relationships. But the good news of Christ's Gospel, is that even though we are all "people with a past" through Jesus of Nazareth and his great love and compassion for us, we now have a future. Through him, in him, and by him we have a

future. The new story is that Christ Jesus came into the world to save Samaritans, and we are all Samaritans. Reach out today and accept his love and his forgiveness. You are the beloved and you belong to the new story. Amen!