



The Sunday Sermon



THE WILDERNESS... A PLACE TO BE SEEN

Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-26

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Two weeks ago, I introduced our wilderness theme for our season of Lent. And today, I'm choosing to open my reflection with you with the same words I spoke at that time. We've all had our wilderness moments. We've all had our wilderness times when the landscape looked unfamiliar and the resources appeared to be scarce. We've been in desolate circumstances. It rang true for us just two weeks ago. If you're anything like me, it is resonating with new depth this side of coronavirus-19 restrictions

I know there are people in our church who know the wilderness of job failure. Either they were asked to leave or the job they held was taken away. There are people in our church who know that wilderness. There are people in our church who know the wilderness of a lost love and the empty relational landscape stripped of its shelter because of abuse or neglect, infidelity, divorce and death. There are people in our church who know the wilderness of immigration and will forever remember the bewildering vastness of a new country, a new culture, new tastes and sounds and sights that told them in a thousand ways every day that this new land was not yet their home. I know there are people in our church who have been to war and have lived through horrors unknown to those they pledged to protect. There are people in our church who know the wilderness where safe shelter for the night is hard to find let alone a new home. There are people in our church who know the wilderness space of their bodies being given a label for a disease which has no easy treatment. There are people in our church who know the desolate tract of addiction. Being in the wilderness can be an experience of powerlessness. And I know that you know this. We are in unprecedented circumstances this morning.

In today's Gospel Jesus interacts with a person in social isolation, a familiar kind of wilderness, sometimes imposed by others, sometimes created by our own choosing. At first glance it may not look like a wilderness to us.

The setting is a well, a place where women from the nearby village gather twice a day to draw water for their households. It is a social center, a place for jokes and laughter, for gossip and news sharing, for the affirmation of one's place in the larger community of life and work. Compared with this, a wilderness can be where one is alone, where no friend is near to lighten the load, where one feels tired and dependent only upon one's own limited resources. I believe Jesus and this woman met in the wilderness. They met in her wilderness.

Did you notice that she comes alone in the heat of the day, at the sixth hour, at noon? Can you feel the Middle Eastern heat on your shoulders as you carry the heavy water jar? Is the well unusually quiet in the absence of communal conversations? Is this the first time she's made the decision to avoid the other women? Or has it become her "new normal" because it's just easier to go it alone than be subjected to the unkind comments or the eerie silence of social shunning? Or perhaps it has always been her way. Sometimes we learn to love the wilderness and fear the fertile fields of community. Sometimes, we learn to love our wildernesses and extend their borders through our own jealousies, discontent, self-protection, bitterness or ill-will.

What she discovers is that Jesus will cross multiple boundaries in order to reach her. Jesus and His friends have blithely wandered to another country. Their more obvious mission is in Judea, the home of the Jews, but here they are in Samaria, the home of "those others", not of the same tribe — a hint of the larger mission that is always at work. I'm thinking Jesus just doesn't care that much about the tribal borders of human countries.

Jesus starts chatting with a local woman. He isn't only unconcerned with political boundaries. It appears He cares little for social boundaries. I think the woman shows her shock at both these boundary crossings in her response: How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4:9) In a religion, and a part of the world where, even today, men and women are often kept quite separate, it must have felt startling if not shattering for her when Jesus jumped into a conversation.

Then there is another kind of boundary crossing: manners. At least in my opinion, Jesus was bold in raising the topic of her marital history and current relationship status. He doesn't let on how he knew, exactly, that she'd had five husbands and was presently living with someone, as people used to say, "out of wedlock." Was it something people had been talking about on the street as they walked along? Was it divine omniscience? John's Gospel doesn't say.

But it couldn't have seemed like good manners to bring it up. I don't think she was exactly surprised to have it tossed in her face. When she said, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet." (John 4:19) I imagine she said it with a sarcastic edge to her tone. Like "And who doesn't know that!" But she goes with the prophet idea and switches to less personal topics: politics and religion.

Her strategy is familiar to us: Get the guy to declare his views on the schism between the Jews and the Samaritans and their different worship practices. That'll get the focus off the most embarrassing bits of her own past.

All this boundary crossing was Jesus' way of getting the topic away from the silence of social custom, away from the trivial of social propriety, away from the impersonal of politics and religion, and onto what matters most: Her relation to Him.

He's always shifting the conversation that way: "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." (John 4:10)

Then when she tries to keep the conversation about literal things, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (John 4:14)

She wants to talk about practicalities. He starts talking in symbols, rich and beautiful symbols of water, not just as something to drink but the very source of life. I imagine we'd be intrigued.

And as symbols go, water is a great one. It's there in creation, when the Spirit hovered over the waters. It's there in redemption, when God parted the waters of the Red Sea for Israel to escape slavery in Egypt. It's there in the Gospels when John came baptizing in the Jordan. It's there earlier in John's Gospel when Jesus turned water in to wine...into truly exceptional wine.

Inside a short conversation Jesus has this woman in the midst of her everyday tasks, thinking about eternal life, living water, worship in spirit and truth — and she starts wondering about God's promises. "I know that Messiah is coming (who is called Christ). ..." (John 4:25)

The amazing thing is that in this conversation far from town, in a foreign land, with a woman, with someone who had a troubled past, her tremulous musing about the Messiah prompts something quite unique: Jesus comes right out and tells her that He, Himself, is the Messiah. "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." (John 4:26)

Contrast this with all His beating around the bush at the far end of the Gospels, before His interrogators and judges in Holy Week: To the powerful He will say nothing. To someone foreign, rejected, socially inappropriate, He has said everything. To save His life, He will say nothing. To save her life, He said everything.

I've learned in my Bible study this week that this is one of those hidden "I Am" sayings I mentioned earlier. It isn't so much "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" as it is, I AM—the one speaking to you. He's acknowledging that He is the Messiah she asked about. But more than that, she's telling Him that He's the one who spoke to Moses at the burning bush.

When we encounter Jesus, whether for the first time, like the woman at the well, or again after a lifetime, we find He invites us to move past the distant and the political. He invites us to move past the socially acceptable. He invites us to move past the personal and the shameful. He will do this in spite of the obstacles we will attempt to put in His way.

So, if you're feeling like you're in a wilderness because of a lifestyle about which you are less than proud—this is story for you. If you're feeling like you're in a wilderness because you've been told you're of the wrong tribe—this is a story for you. If you're familiar with deflecting the personal and spiritual topics to more safe abstractions—this is a story for you. Jesus does everything in His power to bring us to Himself. May you, in the individual circumstances of your life, feel irresistibly drawn, unusually safe and mysteriously loved. May you come to know the source of living water, springing up from within, and overflowing to everlasting life.