

Have You Had a Meeting at the Well?

A series of sermons on John 4

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Meetings, true and authentic human meetings, are about as rare as the watering holes and wells in the semi-arid land of Palestine. “Because of the scarcity of rainfall, wells have always been important in Bible lands and are mentioned frequently in the Bible.” Wells “were especially important in a nomadic society (Gen. 26:18), supplying water for both families and flocks...” (p. 839, *Interpreter’s Dictionary*) People fought over control of wells, then as today. Wells had symbolic and religious significance as well. There is even a “Song of the Well” found in the book of Numbers which “is an early Hebrew folk song suggesting God’s power over the well.”

“Israel sang this song: ‘For the well, sing out for the well

That was sunk by the princes and dug by the leaders of the people with their...staffs.’” (Numbers 21:17-18a) **SING OUT FOR THE WELL!**

The symbolic well that stands in our chancel window today is an actual model of an ancient well on the edge of the Lachish mound in Judea.

Wells were and are meeting places. The real meeting places in the small village of San Onofre, Nicaragua are the three water sources that are along the main street. Around 5:00 every morning, in each section of the village, the women gather with their large water buckets, taking turns filling their buckets and carrying them back home. I only saw one man in the group each morning and when I asked, I was told that his wife wasn’t able to come to the well and carry water. It is a daily ritual because getting ready for the day and eating breakfast cannot easily happen without water.

Jacob’s well has always been a symbol of “meeting.” For 23 centuries, even up to today, the Samaritans have honored this well at the base of Mt. Gerizim, near Shechem. But Jacob’s well is also honored in our tradition because of the meeting that took place between Jesus of Nazareth and a woman of Samaria. That meeting is not only one of the longest interactions recorded in the Bible between Jesus and any other human being, it is not only one of the most famous in the Bible, but it is one of the most widely known meetings between a man and a woman in all of recorded history.

Have you had a meeting at the well?

“Meeting” is an interesting choice of words, isn’t it? Particularly in church? My two children grew to resent meetings during their growing up years. “You’re not going to another meeting tonight, are you, Dad?” One month I counted 46 meetings. And I submit to you that no kingdom, including God’s kingdom, requires 46 meetings in one month!! There has to be

something wrong with someone who has that many meetings, appointments, consultations in one month!

I enjoy this church because we seldom have meetings for the sake of meetings. No group in the church meets unless there is a reason or need to meet. What a novel idea!?! Surely you have attended pointless meetings, haven't you, where there seems to be no agenda and the focus just meanders around trying to justify itself?

There's a cartoon I kept for many years that depicts a committee of church people sitting around the table, and the chair of the meeting complains, "I don't know why they are mad at us! We haven't done anything!"

And sometimes, we get so accustomed to it, we attend meetings but we don't really hear one another. There's a story of a young pastor who was preaching his first sermon. And he wasn't accustomed to preaching or to that pulpit. And in the middle of his sermon, he forgot his next thought. He couldn't remember a thing. But he remembered that his professor in seminary had taught him, "Anytime you forget your next point, just repeat your last point for emphasis and that will get you back on track." So, the desperate young preacher decided to give it a try. For emphasis, he repeated, "Behold, I come quickly." But still, his mind was blank. He repeated it again with emphasis, "Behold, I come quickly." Still, nothing. So, he tried it a third time with such force that he lost his balance, tipped over the pulpit, stepped into a basket of flowers and landed in the lap of an older woman seated on the front pew.

The young pastor was mortified. He got up, helped the woman back to her pew, picked up the flowers, all the while apologizing and trying to explain to her what happened. Finally, the woman motioned for him to be silent, saying, "It's alright, young man. It was really my fault. I should have gotten out of your way. After all, you told me three times that you were coming!"

I began by saying, "Meetings, true and authentic human meetings, are about as rare as the watering holes and wells in the semi-arid land of Palestine."

You see, there are meetings, and then there are meetings. Most of our lives are cluttered with meetings that may hold purpose or promise, but in the end make little difference. True and authentic meetings are indeed rare. How rare it is when we feel we have touched lives with another human being in a profound way.

Have you had a meeting at the well? True and authentic human meetings can be life-changing. Such was the meeting between Jesus and the woman at the well. The woman, of course, had a name, and unfortunately, we don't know her name. And a person without a name lacks identity, lacks personality. With your permission, over the coming Sundays, I'd like to assign this woman a name. Let's call her, Miriam, so that we may take her as seriously as did Jesus. Scripture says, "Jesus knew everything there was to know about her", so, surely, that included calling her by name.

Getting called by name is important to us. In those days when we used to go inside banks for every transaction, I recall that all the employees were coached to use the customer's name. I

know it is a sales approach, but it works. It makes you feel like it's my bank because they know my name. My local drugstore pharmacy has a remarkable young woman who seems to call everyone by their name and I suspect she is personally responsible for repeat business because everyone likes that. That's why we use nametags at church so that those who are new to us can know everyone's name.

I have observed women going to a community well or watering hole in the Philippines, in Thailand, in Kenya, in South Africa, in Nicaragua and El Salvador and Burma. And they all go at the crack of dawn. And by the time the heat of the morning is felt, they are all back home and the well stands empty.

And we know that this woman came to the well "about noon." (John 4:6) And I wonder if she didn't come to the well about noon in order to avoid the other women who would have already met one another earlier in the day at Jacob's well. It seems clear from our story that Jesus and the woman were completely alone for an extended period of time. Miriam went to the well when no one else was going to the well.

At that hour, she could go in solitude. She could go to the well, and avoid a meeting. Women go to the well for water, but they also go to begin the day in conversation. They go to the well for a meeting, to connect, to catch up, to share stories.

Women go to the well when other women are there. It's safer that way. They are less likely to be in danger in the presence of other women. But it's also a time to connect with friends. So here comes this lone Samaritan woman, walking up the path. And often by middle age, you can nearly tell our life-stories just by looking at us. Some of us have a real hard look. You can look at some people and think, "That person has had a hard life."

I recall staying with Salvadorans once who had been through the daily terror of war for ten years. And I was shocked that men who looked old enough to be my father were actually younger than me. After you've lived long enough, our life-stories can be told in part in our faces and in our hands, telling something about the kind of life we've lived. You can observe the way people carry themselves, the way they dress. You can form your own conclusions.

Anytime someone says, "Your reputation precedes you," it piques your curiosity to learn just what part of your reputation they've heard! If you look closely in my face, you'll see marks of a serious auto accident from 1986: it's on my upper lip, on my nose, on my left cheek, on my chin and forehead. The lines, the wrinkles and the marks on our faces and bodies tell a story. Miriam's clothing probably told a story too. After five husbands and a live-in, it's a little late to dress conservatively.

So, here comes this Samaritan woman walking to the well all by herself, intending and hoping to meet no one. She's had a hard life. She hasn't been treated well. Jesus observed her dress, her walk, her face and already knew much about this woman.

And sometimes, we just don't notice. Years ago, in 1973 I believe, American Baptists were having their annual meeting in Atlantic City, New Jersey. My college roommate and I were

reconnecting after several years apart. We had walked up to a street corner, outside the bargain hotel where one of us was staying, and were caught up in conversation together. And two women approached, and began talking with us. I remember at the time thinking, “My, these Atlantic City folks are really friendly!” The women lingered with us for some time, and we kept talking, and suddenly, a pink Cadillac roared up to the sidewalk in front of us, and the man at the wheel gave us a dirty look, and told the women, “Get in the car!” Just as the car sped away, another friend, who had been walking toward us and witnessed the entire thing said, “What’s the matter with you two? Couldn’t you negotiate a deal with those ladies?” I was about 24 at the time, and I don’t think I’d ever been propositioned by a prostitute. My roommate and I were in so deep by that point, we didn’t know whether we should play it cool and act like we know what just happened, or admit our down-home naivete.

I suspect Jesus was much less naïve. I suspect he could tell by the way Miriam was dressed, by the time of the day she came to the well, by her social demeanor, that she carried a social stigma in her community and was widely known for her failed relationships. She had a reputation.

I don’t know why, but I think Jesus saw her coming and decided to have a meeting at the well with Miriam. Have you had a meeting at the well?

Sometimes in our sophisticated society, we are tempted to think our way to God. To rationalize our way to God. As if we could cognitively figure God out.

But God isn’t something we think, not even something we decide, not something we feel. God is One we encounter. We meet God. Have you had a meeting at the well? A true, authentic meeting with Jesus at the well?

Is Jesus only some teacher 2,000 years ago who lived an exemplary life, or is it possible to have a meeting with Jesus? Can you encounter Jesus today?

Have you had a meeting at the well? Have you experienced God in Christ? Or it is all a head-thing with you? Have you figured out your beliefs, organized them and call that faith? Did you just inherit faith from your ancestors, or have you had a meeting at the well?

Jesus is someone we encounter – that message is repeated on every page of the Gospels. Peter and Andrew, James and John met Jesus along the lake as he was coming toward them. Levi met Jesus at his toll booth. Mary Magdalene came to Jesus possessed by demons and out of her mind with fear and anxiety. Miriam wasn’t looking for Jesus. Indeed, she was hoping not to meet a soul. Just get her water and walk her round-about way back home along the side streets of the village. But, it didn’t work out that way. Like all the others, Miriam met Jesus that day – just the two of them – at Jacob’s well.

Our faith is incarnational. That means, we meet God in a human body. The same way they met Jesus back in Galilee, on dusty trails, at wells, beside the sea, within synagogues, in homes. They met Jesus.

Have you had a meeting at the well? What is your faith based upon? Reason? Emotion? Tradition? Do we come here on Sundays for worship out of tradition? Or do we come here to encounter the Living Christ? Do we come here for ritual – or for encounter?

There is something about walking to the well, wherever the well is in your life, and there opening yourself up, just as Miriam did, and in so doing, experiencing the forgiving, healing love of God in Jesus Christ.

If you haven't experienced that, in a while, or ever, I invite you to come to the well! And allow yourself to experience, either for the first time, or again, that you came here today to meet God and discovered to your surprise that God is already here and God is ready to meet you! That's what happened to Miriam. She encountered Jesus at the well. While he was lingering behind at the well, sending his disciples on for food in the village, Jesus was ready for her! He was eager for a meeting!

Meetings of this kind can be frightening. And life-changing. And as far as we know, Jesus and Miriam never met again, once Jesus left her village. It was a one-time meeting.

I was flying on an airplane practically sitting in the lap of an older gentleman sitting next to me. We spoke to each other but I suspect we both hoped to have a quiet relaxing flight. He noticed that I was reading the Christian Century Magazine. He said, "Are you a pastor?" I always hate it when people recognize what I do for a living. There was a day when I tried very hard not to look the part. I might be a little like Miriam, the less you know about me, the better. I said, "Yes, I am." And where do you serve?, he asked, and I told him where I was serving. And he asked if we were Southern Baptists, and I told him, "We're American Baptist." "American Baptist," he exclaimed, almost rising out of his seat. He said, "I'm an American Baptist too. I don't think I've ever met an American Baptist in a random setting like this. In fact, I'm the music director of First Baptist Church of St. Paul, Minnesota." I said, "Well, it's a small world isn't it? I've known a few pastors who have served there in the past." And thus began a long and animated conversation. He had something on his mind that afternoon when he asked, "How long do you think a music director should serve? Do you think I'm too old to continue?" He told me that these were questions that were bothering him but he didn't feel free to raise those questions with his pastor or members of his choir. I told him, "I don't think age matters. I think its whether you enjoy serving and feel like you still have something to offer." We never met again. We never spoke again. But I can still remember the questions he asked, honest, searching, relevant questions and my trying to respond to him in affirming ways. We had a meeting on the airplane. And it wasn't just about work. It was about calling, and vision, and purpose and our personal fulfillment and what God was doing in our lives.

Who put that meeting together? Who arranged for it? Who could have anticipated it?

And yet we have meetings like this – not all the time – but often enough – meetings that we remember not just because we met with another person, but because the Living Christ is embodied in those kinds of meetings.

Have you had a meeting at the well? Amen.