



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

March 8, 2026; Lent 3A [Exodus 17:1-7](#); [Romans 5:1-11](#); [John 4:5-42](#)

Today we have the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. But who are the Samaritans? To answer this question, we need to go back to a key event in the history of Israel known as the exile. The Exile began in 578 BCE, when Israel was defeated and the southern tribes were taken as prisoners to Babylon. (Before this, the northern tribes had been taken away earlier by Assyria) They would be in Babylon for 70 years. This was a difficult but formative time for the Jewish faith and Jewish people. With the temple and sacred texts destroyed, they had to rebuild their religion from memory. Their writing down of oral traditions became what is known as the “Priestly Document,” an important source for what we now call the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures. It is important to note, however, that not all the Jewish people were taken to Babylon. Like many ancient conquerors, the Babylonians focused their efforts on deporting and enculturating the educated and ruling classes, leaving many of the working poor behind. Those left in Israel also had to rebuild their religious faith and traditions, which they did, even to the point of building a new temple on Mt. Gerazim in Samaria. Just as the Jewish people who went to Babylon intermarried with Babylonians and were influenced by Babylonian religion and culture, those who went to Samaria intermarried with Assyrians and Canaanites and were influenced by Assyrian and Canaanite religion and culture. The result was that when the exiles returned from Babylon they met Jews whose expression of Judaism looked nothing like their own. They treated these people as an underclass that was unclean and untouchable. They called these people Samaritans. The story of the Samaritan Woman at the well shows what the Samaritan's experience was like. Shunned by others, she was forced to draw water at noon, the hottest part of the day when no one else was there. Jesus broke all the rules by going and talking directly with her.

In his book The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic, Bishop Jack Spong suggests that the woman's five husbands symbolically represent five kings of Samaria and that Jesus' acceptance of the Samaritan woman is a metaphor for God's acceptance of the Samaritan people as a whole. From this perspective, this story is a symbol of the inclusion and acceptance of the Kingdom of God, the breaking down of barriers and stereotypes, and of Jesus' welcome to everyone.

I like this interpretation because I know that in the eyes of many faith leaders today, I am a Samaritan. For those who declare Holy War on foreign nations, who declare Holy War on foreigners in our own nation, and who declare a Holy War on our own citizens, those of us who declare these things wrong and see war as a very last resort are considered unclean, apostate, and hopelessly naive. For those who see empathy and compassion as weakness, who decline to say or do anything about the death of 168 of girls in an Iranian school or the sexual abuse and exploitation of hundreds of other girls at the hands of the richest men in our country, those who would call out and condemn these actions are accused of being victims and promulgators of what I learned this week is called "woke" Christianity. (I find this verbiage interesting. Didn't Jesus say that loving our neighbor was the most important thing after loving God? Isn't the opening of eyes a Christian theme? Isn't waking up another way of describing resurrection? But I digress.) My untouchable status, by the way, doesn't just come from religious extremists here at home. This week, GAFCON, a group based in Nigeria that claims to represent 85 million Anglicans, actually discussed appointing an alternative Archbishop of Canterbury, a step deemed necessary because the new Archbishop of Canterbury has the audacity to be a woman. It's not just clergy and the church. From a global perspective, our whole country has quickly moved to Samaritan status. Like the Samaritan Woman at the well who was married five times but never really married at all, we have put up a series of distractions and deflections to hide who we are and what is going on. Like the neighbors of the Samaritan woman, our neighbors see through it all.

The amazing thing is that Jesus sees through it all too and comes to the Samaritan Woman anyway. Though he listens to her story, it seems that he already knows everything that has happened in her life... and loves her anyway. He not only loves her, he heals her, gives her the water of life, and

then invites her - a woman - to join him in sharing Good News and building the Kingdom of God.

So what about you? Have you ever felt like that Samaritan Woman? Have you ever found yourself carrying your burdens, alone, in the heat of the day? Have you ever found yourself emotionally and spiritually dried out, parched, longing for the water of life? Do you find yourself putting your bucket into the well of Jacob, of all the great traditions of our faith, and thirsting for something more? Like Moses striking the rock, Jesus has the ability to break through the hardest of barriers so we can drink from the water of life... and will do that even if we grumbled along the way. Like the Samaritan Woman at the well, Jesus knows your story, understands all your trials and tribulations and loves you anyway. Like the Samaritan Woman at the well, Jesus wants to use you to share good news and build the Kingdom of God. Being a Samaritan is not a bad thing. As activists know, change - real change - comes from the fringes, from those outside of power. If you are being treated like a Samaritan - pushed aside, ignored, and forced to get water alone in the hottest part of the day - you may be being given an opportunity. Remember that Jesus used a Samaritan to show the world what love in action looked like. Jesus used a Samaritan to show the world what was good. May we all be Samaritans - that kind of Samaritan - today.