

A Simpler Way

From the series: Meeting God Again For the First Time

Text: John 4:23-24

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The writer of the fourth Gospel tells us explicitly that he was very intentional in the creation of the Gospel he wrote: John 20:30-31 - a portrait painted, a story told, that you might believe that Jesus was the Messiah, thereby finding life through his name.

This one, the author believed, came from God and was the embodiment in human form of God's being, purpose, and grace that, through God's Spirit, possessed him and filled him.

The God Who in the beginning breathed the creative process into being was now breathing life in a new dimension in and through this one, Jesus - Jesus was anointed with God's Spirit. The Hebrew word for that *anointing* was *Messiah*; the Greek word, *Christ*.

John was writing at a time of great turmoil, tension and ferment in the Jewish community. The center of Israel's life and worship - the symbol of God's presence in their midst - had been destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Roman occupying power.

How now would they maintain their peoplehood, their identity as God's chosen ones? The dominant group emerging was the Pharisaic party - to become the group that eventually determined the Judaism of the future, the Rabbinic group ensuring that Judaism would be a people of the Book, the sacred text.

But, in the last decades of the first century, the movement stemming from Jesus was a viable contender. The followers of this crucified one whom his followers experienced as living and present to them made up a significant segment of the population. But they had reached out beyond the narrow confines of the Jewish community; they had, in quite revolutionary fashion, formed a Jesus community among the Samaritans with whom the Jews lived in great hostility and even among the Gentiles - that is, with non-Jews.

At least in part, the fourth Gospel was written to root this outward reaching of the very early movement in the understanding and ministry of Jesus himself.

The reason is obvious:

There were strong differences in the Jesus movement that in its early stages was exclusively Jewish. There were Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah and the End was near, the reign of God approaching, but who failed to see the reason for reaching out beyond their own. And there were others - think of Stephen and of Paul who felt the call to bring the story of God's grace in Jesus to the nations.

In other words, there were advocates of a purely Jewish Jesus community and there were advocates of a universal mission. I think that is the rationale by which the Gospel writer chose the story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well who was encountered by Jesus.

I will not retell the story; suffice it to say that Jesus chooses to go from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north by the direct route which takes him through Samaria, a hostile territory peopled by those the Jews considered alien, whose worship the Jews considered false, even though the Samaritans stemming from the ten Northern Tribes of Israel shared the Mosaic heritage, following the *Pentateuch*, the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture.

It is in Samaria at the place of the ancient well of Jacob that Jesus engages a Samaritan woman in conversation. He asks for a drink of water from the well, only to offer her living water. The writer's literary technique is to reveal the soul thirst of this woman for the truth. The conversation issues in a question that divided the Jews and Samaritans: the Samaritans claimed their Mt. Gerizim was the place of true worship, pre-dating the establishment of Jerusalem later by David, while the Jews, of course, contended it was at Jerusalem that God caused the Holy Name, or the Presence, to dwell.

This allows the Gospel writer to put Jesus on the side of those who saw the universal implications of Jesus' ministry -

"Woman," he says, "the hour is coming and now is when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth."

Without attempting to give an in-depth explanation of that response, it must be obvious on the surface that Jesus here points to a new situation and a new manner of worship and devotion.

He does not say worship at Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem had never been true worship, or that God could not be worshiped at one place or the other.

He does, however, relativize the question of place which would represent the whole apparatus of the cultic forms used in the worship of the respective communities.

We have come to a moment in the practice of religious worship, Jesus contends, according to this account, when place and all the external accouterments that go with it become matters of indifference.

The external forms of worship are intended to be and can be means by which, through which, the human spirit comes into communion with the divine Spirit - the liturgy, the ritual action, the very physical space designated for the worship of God, can be vehicles of grace through which the communion with God is affected. The setting and the manner of our worship is not a matter of indifference to be tended to in a slovenly way. But they are the triggers only to bring us to awareness of the Holy, of that transcendent source of our being by whose grace we live and move and have our being.

It has been characteristic of Christian preaching to set Jesus and thus Christianity off from Judaism as a spiritual religion over against a religion of outward observance. This is a distortion and it misses the point.

Jesus was a Jew.

Jesus was not saying Judaism as a religion was being superseded, to be replaced now by Christianity. Jesus was pointing to the nature of true worship and the temptation of all religious worship to become an outward form lacking inward transforming power.

The result of this encounter is not Christianity - Jewish - 1 and Samaritan devotion - 0.

Worship that is inwardly aware of the gracious ground of our being is present in many religious traditions. Formalism, devoid of Spirit, is to be found, as well, in all forms of religious devotion, Christianity included.

But, that in no way detracts from the stunning breakthrough that Jesus represented in his life and teaching. Jesus saw the temptation of the religious institution to make itself exclusive and absolute and he broke through the false barriers that purported to demarcate the only true way. Jesus saw the demonic barriers that walled people off from one another, defining those who were in and those who were out, the accepted ones and the rejected ones.

He conversed with a Samaritan. Jesus saw the oppression and domination of women by men who considered women of a lesser subhuman class. In a society where a man prayed daily thanking God he was not born a woman, Jesus conversed with a woman, treating her with respect and dignity and human decency.

Jesus saw the restrictive limitations of religious and cultural patterns and dared to defy them, to shatter them and to declare by word and action a new day, a

movement toward a fuller humanization of society. And Jesus did it not because it was in the cultural air, but because he believed that is the way God intended it.

God is Spirit. God must be worshiped in spirit and in truth. Jesus refused to bow to social custom or religious regulation when those violated the reality of the Spirit.

Traditional definitions, conventional wisdom, social mores, cultural patterns - all of that, for Jesus, needed constantly to be examined, reformed, transformed in the light of the spiritual reality that comes from inward awareness and attentiveness.

There are times of cultural crisis when old ways are challenged and foundations crumble. We are in such a time; it has been a long time building - perhaps since the 15th century, or certainly since the 18th. It is my contention that the church has not yet faced the implications of the modern period. The structure of faith and biblical understanding in which I was nurtured and trained and that has shaped the Christian tradition, Protestant and Catholic, is largely the product of the post-Reformation, a 17th-century paradigm of biblical faith impacted very little by the explosion of knowledge in the modern world.

The Christian tradition from which we stem still speaks in terms of an absolute truth it claims to possess and an exclusive truth to which it must bring the world, denying the salvific value of all other traditions.

I included a couple of paragraphs from Gordon Kaufman's *God, Mystery, Diversity* as an alternative to the absolutism and exclusivism claims of Christian orthodoxy. I think what Kaufman is contending is very much in the spirit of what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman -

The hour is come when the model can no longer be pronouncement of our way as the only way. Rather, the time has come when the Spirit is calling us to break down the barriers we have erected.

Is it not ironic that the one who threw down the exclusionary barriers that divided people and defined the truth is, in the Christian church, made the absolute revealer of God and the exclusive source of the grace of God?

The disciples returned from buying food to find Jesus in conversation with a Samaritan, and a woman at that, but they dared not mention it. Instead, they said, "Eat." But, Jesus wasn't hungry any longer. The conversation triggered in him the realization of the deep hunger in the hearts of humankind. He was a man obsessed with his sense of calling to do God's work.

"Look around you," he said. "Don't you see the spiritual hunger ... see how the fields are ripe for harvesting?"

Don't you see it?

The mainline churches are limping badly and the world is spiritually starved. The Promisekeepers have tapped into this spiritual hunger, but I don't think the answer lies in what is an attempt to return to yesterday with a strong dose of emotion. The megachurches are flourishing, but there is no attempt to re-think the faith in the modern world.

Jesus said neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem - old forms can't bear the weight of truth for our world. The old institutional alignments are dead - the old orthodoxy cannot prevail.

But, God is God.

There is yet living water flowing to quench the thirst and satisfy the hunger of the soul - if only we would let go, wait with openness and awareness to hear and sense what the Spirit is saying to us. If only we would give up our certainties and wait in the darkness, trusting that the living God will show us wonders of which we've not yet dreamed.

Reference:

Gordon D. Kaufman. *God, Mystery, Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World*. Fortress Press, 1996.