

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 March 20, 2011 – Lent 3A
 John 4:5-42; The Woman at the Well
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Every day she carried her empty water jug to fill at Jacob's well just outside the town of Sychar – midway between Jerusalem and Nazareth. Every day she went, alone, at the 6th hour – at noontime – the hottest part of the day, no companionship to ease the burden of her work. But she would rather go then than during the cool of the day when the other women also arrived to fill their cisterns. They'd come, greet each other, catch up on the news, the gossip – but this woman was someone they talked about. She's not welcome at their social hour. How tired she was of their gossip. But better the scorching heat than their sharp remarks.

We don't know her name – she's known only to us as the Samaritan woman – but her story is our story – she comes regularly to the deep well that provides the thing most necessary for her, for our, physical survival – water. And we too are drawn to what we need or think we need, for our own survival, physical, emotional, spiritual. This woman had no idea as she came to the well how her life was about to change – she had no idea of the transformation she would experience that hot noon hour. It makes me wonder are we, am I, ready for such a change, such a transformation that could be right in front of us, of me?

The story of the woman at the well is a familiar one – it's an extraordinary story with so many levels of meaning, so many profound truths, so much under the surface, so very moving. It's about faith development, it's about discipleship, about evangelism; but most of all, it's about Christ – about meeting Christ in unlikely, unexpected, ordinary places – it's about meeting Christ no matter who we are or where we are on life's journey, what our history is, no matter what we do. And it's about Christ meeting us – in the unlikely times and settings of our lives.

She was surprised to see that today someone else was there at the well – a Jew from Galilee by the look of him. She thought, at least she had nothing to fear from his tongue – Jews always did their best to avoid Samaritans, a result of a 300+ year old conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans – a dispute about the correct location of worship: the Jews at the temple in Jerusalem, the Samaritans in a shrine they'd built which was destroyed by Jewish troops many years earlier. We can understand the depths, the length of this dispute – consider the time these 2 groups hated each other – for generations! That kind of feeling doesn't go away easily, does it. We see it today in Ireland, South Africa, in the mid-east, all those places where hatreds seem to be inbred.

So as she approaches the well, for once she's glad to be ignored – grateful that men just didn't address women in public.

But as she gets closer, the man startles her, breaking all the rules she had counted on to protect her. “Will you give me a drink?” he asked. This conversation is scandalous!

And she knows it too – how is it you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? Much less drink out of the same cup. In Jesus time women were not allowed to speak with men, worship with men – in fact the men’s morning devotions included the prayer, “Thank God I’m not a woman!” Women were to be seen and not heard, especially by holy men.

She’s a real outcast, isn’t she. And we read of her 5 husbands, our minds wander to the possibility that she’s also a fallen woman. We just don’t have any information about these 5 husbands except they existed – we make our own assumptions, don’t we. There are multiple possibilities of the reason for her marital history. But Jesus doesn’t pass any moral judgment – in fact, the reasons don’t seem to concern him. If anything, he draws closer to her – he still wants a drink from her, he continues to talk with her. Scandal.

But. They continue to talk and their conversation becomes a history lesson, a synopsis of the story, and we are privileged to watch her journey of faith development. And it all takes place at the well of Jacob – Jacob, son of Isaac, who is son of Abraham. The one God promised, “I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you.” She clearly knows the history – the faith story as she moves on in her conversation to the prophets, those people set apart by God to teach, to warn about the consequences of leaving God behind – those people who tell of the future, the Messiah to come. She decides Jesus must be a prophet after he tells her her whole life story. How else would he know all that about her?

Here’s the amazing thing: Jesus and this woman, this outsider, this Samaritan have the first theological discussion in John’s gospel – and this story relates the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in the entire New Testament. Longer than with his family. Longer than with his closest disciples.

They talk about worship – the appropriate place – in the temple? In the shrine? It doesn’t matter, Jesus says – but the hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship God in spirit and truth, for God seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth. The central symbol of religions power is no longer a place – but the Body – the body of Christ. Social and religious distinctions between Jew and Samaritan, men and women, just no longer have any validity – place doesn’t matter. Community matters.

She stays with him in the conversation, doesn’t she. And what’s her response? A faith statement. I know the Messiah is coming.

And then: Jesus tells her – “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Can’t you just see these two people standing there looking at each other in the brilliance and the oppressive heat of the noon sun? The silence that is palpable. The woman trying to take it all in. Trying to understand that she’s standing in the presence of the long awaited Messiah. She thinks, “This can’t be, can it?”

Have you ever been in the presence of one who just fills the entire room? A life bringing presence – not just through their words or what they do but just by who they are? A healing, calming, empowering presence – their force meets yours with an electric feeling – imagine how this Samaritan woman felt. Can you imagine how you’d feel? How would you react?

The conversation Jesus has with this most unlikely person is even more extraordinary: it’s the first time he has said to another living soul that he is the Messiah.

It's a moment of full disclosure – the outsider and the Messiah, God incarnate, stand face to face with no pretense about who they are. Both stand at high noon, in the heat of the day, and for one moment, one incredible moment in time, all the rules, taboos, and the history that have separated them fall forgotten to the ground.

The power of the Spirit! The power of the encounter here – at the life giving well. It's breathtaking. This encounter in the most unlikely place, between Jesus Christ and the most unlikely person – a conversation between a man and a woman, explodes into epiphany. And it can be the same for us too.

We can't help but think of those times when we have experienced, encountered, the very presence of God. Isn't it then when we too ask, "He can't be, can he?" That presence is available to each and every one of us – a gift of grace – if we will but see. Jesus waits for us too to bring us living water – life giving water.

Back to our story – the moment passes. The disciples return from their shopping trip and see Jesus talking to this woman. But their question, "why are you speaking to her" remains unspoken. Their natural protest reflects the traditional cultural and social conventions and expectations. But, somehow they know that Jesus is not, will not be limited by such conventions and restraints. He has broken open the boundaries – the grace of God that he offers is open to all.

And now comes the lesson in discipleship and evangelism: the woman has been transformed by her encounter with Jesus. When the disciples return the woman leaves Jesus and returns to the city to tell the townspeople about Jesus. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" And on the basis of her testimony many of the Samaritan villagers believe and go to meet Jesus themselves. Another startling turn to the story: again, it's a woman who brings the news, who talks theology with the villagers – not a man! It's an outsider who "gets it" and wants to share the lifechanging water she's been given.

To witness to Jesus, to see Jesus, to tell others about that experience is one of the primary tasks of discipleship. John the Baptist witnessed to Jesus and led some of his own disciples to Jesus. Jesus' first disciples witnessed and the number of his followers grew. Now it's a Samaritan woman witnesses and through her words many come to faith. "Come and see this man,"

Quite a story, isn't it. A nameless woman goes to the well at noon and finds a man sitting there. And moments later her life is totally changed. Just as God met the Israelites wandering in their wilderness, God in Christ met this woman at her wilderness at the well. She didn't understand in the beginning what was happening – who of us does? But her movement through the process of faith development, even to her question, "he can't be, can he?" is a model for us. We too are met at our wilderness places – Jesus waits for us to see him, to speak with him, to love and be loved by him. Jesus waits for us to be willing to be transformed. This story is the model for us as individuals and for us as the gathered community to action: to leave as she did and bring others back for them to believe. That's the pattern of discipleship and evangelism: our witness that leads to Jesus moves to our own experience of faith, and then we go and tell.

We too are met in the most unlikely, ordinary places of our lives just as she was. The question is, will we recognize that meeting? Will we recognize Jesus when he meets us in our daily living? Do we even bother to look? Because it's getting out of bed, cooking breakfast, traveling to work, attending group meetings – all these times are

opportunities for recognizing the presence of God. Jesus meets us in the ordinary. Expect the unexpected. Is the Lord in our midst? Absolutely. He can't be the Messiah, can he? Oh yes!

The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are, the good and bad of it, all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you really are by showing you who he really is, who crosses all boundaries, breaks all the rules, drops all disguises. He speaks to you like someone you have known all your life, filling you with the water of new life and then you are called and empowered to go back to people you thought you could never face again, speaking to them as boldly as he spoke to you, "Come and see." Perhaps you will even be able to face yourself in a new way – forgiven, a beloved child of God, empowered for an abundance of life you never thought possible. For all of us, for you and for me, this can happen anywhere, anytime, any place we are willing to stop and say, "Lord, give me this water so I may never thirst again." May we open our eyes that we may see. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord, here we are. We have come to worship, come seeking you and your will for us. We are here searching for you, seeking meaning for our lives, seeking a reason to go on living, hoping to discover purpose and direction.

Yet, today we discover that it is more accurate to say that we are here because you have been searching for us, waiting for us. You have been seeking us before we got around to looking for you. We are here because we have been called – we are here as those who have heard you. We are here, not because we have been so wise to look for you, but rather because you have been so loving as to seek us. Here we are. At last you have our attention. We await your Word. Amen.