

**Feb. 4, 2018 – (Epiphany 5, John)  
Sermon Text – John 4:1-42**

- Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him...Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony...They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." -

**Previously in this two-part sermon. We met Nicodemus and the woman at the well. The two go together. They are opposites in the story of God's love for the world. As you will remember, Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a Jew, and a religious leader. He has a name, which gives him higher standing; but, he approaches Jesus at night, because he isn't sure he wants people to know he is talking to him. This does not bode well for the results of their conversation. Nicodemus will not understand, at least not right away. The woman at the well is, well, a woman. She is a Samaritan, a religious outsider. And, she is nameless. This generally indicates that she is a person of no consequence; but, Jesus seeks her out at noon, when the sun's light is the brightest. This bodes well for the outcome of their conversation. She will understand. As we came to the end of last week's episode, I was telling you that Jesus was saying that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." And then he adds, "and this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world." The problem is that Nicodemus, as a representative of the religious community, could not see the light in the person of Jesus. He is too much surrounded by darkness. The woman at the well, however, is clearly in the light. She comes to the well when the sun is shining its brightest. There she will see the light and ever so much more.**

**Our story for today begins with John's comment that Jesus "had to go through Samaria." I've been to the Holy Land twice. I've been to Jerusalem and the region of Judea in the south and I've been to Nazareth and the region of Galilee in the north; but, I have never been to Samaria, the region in between. I've never "had to go through Samaria." No one has ever "had to go through Samaria." And Jews certainly would not have "had to go through Samaria," unless there was something very specific and very important about their trip. First, the place is hilly. It's much easier to walk down from Jerusalem to the Jordan River valley, then follow the river northward to the Sea of Galilee, before dispersing to the many towns in Galilee; or, one can take the "way of the sea" northward along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Second, the place is full of Samaritans, and Jews did not like Samaritans. While they worshiped the**

same God and traced their origin to the same patriarchs, the Samaritans were different. They worshiped in a different place and they accepted only the first five books of the Bible. And the Jews considered them to be contaminated by the influx of Assyrians, who had conquered the northern territory and moved in to stay. The only reason Jesus has for going through their region is that he is on a mission. He is determined to show his disciples what loving the world is all about. And the Samaritans represent the world.

And least among the Samaritans is a nameless woman who happens to show up at a famous well in their territory at noon. Jesus is about crossing boundaries. His ministry, once thought to be only for the Jews, is branching out. He's crossing a barrier between the Jews and the Samaritans; but, while he's at it, why not cross as many boundaries as possible? New Testament scholar, Karoline Lewis, writes in her commentary on John, "The boundaries crossed in this encounter continue to build. We have a man speaking to a woman, a rabbi speaking to a woman, a Jew speaking to a Samaritan, and now, we find out, they are *alone*...For all intents and purposes, this conversation not only should not be happening...it stands way outside the realm of possibility." Jesus is shattering all kinds of expectations; and yet, their conversation is based on a very simple set of basic needs. Jesus is thirsty, but the well is deep, and he has no bucket. The woman has come to draw water. She has a bucket, but she is looking for some kind of peace in the midst of her troubled life. Jesus has the "living water" that can calm her fears and sustain her being. Their conversation begins to shine the light not only into their daytime scene at the well, but into her life as a woman in a male-dominated culture. She is most likely its victim. That has been going on for a long time now, since way before the #metoo or #timesup movements ever began. Much is made of the fact that she comes to the well at noon instead of the morning and evening like other women. Many will interpret it to mean that she is a sinner, but there is no indication that she is any worse than anyone else. There is simply a statement that she has had five husbands and the man she is living with now is not her husband. The fact is, quite simply, that she could be widowed or divorced multiple times, or quite possibly a combination of the two. If she is a widow, she is a victim of conflict or illness. If she is divorced, she is likely a victim of childlessness. If her fifth husband is dead, she is a victim of the law, which said she had to go and live with her husband's brother, so that he could provide offspring for his brother who has died. The shame of all this may simply be too much for her to bear. In the eyes of her culture, she is a loser. She comes at noon to avoid the others, so that she doesn't have to endure their condescending remarks.

The thing is, Jesus cares nothing about all that. He knows all about her, yet he

speaks to her as an equal. They are two people in need of the other's help. She can provide water to quench his thirst. He can provide "living water" to sustain her unto eternal life. Their conversation elevates her position. It raises her self-esteem. She experiences that God loves even her. This changes everything. Again, Karoline Lewis says, "She leaves behind her ostracism, her marginalization, her loneliness, because Jesus has brought her into his fold. She leaves behind her disgrace, her disregard, and the disrespect she has endured to enter into a new reality, a new life that is abundant life." Listen to what the woman says when she returns to her village, "Come and see (have we not heard those words before?) ...Come and see a man who told me everything that I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" This tentative, backward, questioning invitation is her witness! Jesus is the Messiah! But the Samaritans will have to come and see for themselves. When they do, they ask Jesus to stay with them and they declare that they now "know that this is truly the Savior of the world." If you want to see the light in this story, there it is! It shines through in Jesus' conversation with an unnamed woman at a well, to whom he shouldn't ever have even been speaking. And it continues to shine in her report to the people of her village. Jesus is the Messiah, the Light of the World. Next week: a man born blind, who sees perfectly that very same light!

Amen.