

**Gary Harder, March 23, 2014**

**“Encountering God in our thirst”**

Text: John 4:1-30

Introduction: Last week Lydia preached on the story from John chapter 3, the story of Nicodemus. The story is about a respected religious leader, a man honored and respected by all the people, an insider by every definition. Today our lectionary reading offers the story from John chapter 4 – the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. In sharp contrast to Nicodemus, John tells the story of a total outsider – a woman, a Samaritan – that is, a foreigner – and one who has hints of scandal all over her. John tells two stories from opposite ends of society. Why?

Setting the stage

I want you to picture a giant chess board – a huge social chess board. This one is big, really big. It covers all of Palestine – or all of Canada, for that matter. A bird’s eye view of the chess board reveals characters of many shapes and many sizes. Some are much bigger than others. It is assumed they have far more power and prestige. Knights and bishops. Queens and Kings. On this board there are also lots of small pieces. There are lots and lots of pawns. Expendable pawns.

But a bird, a huge dove, hovering overhead, sees something strange. For one thing, each piece is busy building walls around itself – protective walls. Everyone seems to need the security of living inside very sturdy walls where nothing can get in, and nothing can get out. Each player just sits there isolated.

The second thing the bird notices is that there is no sign of movement on the board, no sign of anyone actually playing the game. No activity at all. It seems as if everyone is afraid to make a move. You move and you could get jumped on. So you just add more stones to your fortress and sit there, in fear, hoping no-one moves against you. A whole chess board frozen in time. It’s as if the white witch from C.S. Lewis’s Narnia has zapped everyone with her magic wand, frozen everyone in place, and turned all her enemies into pillars of stone.

The bird notices labels on each of the boxes, and flies lower to read each one. There they are, in bold letters, heavy, dark print, almost as bold as the “keep out or else” sign stamped everywhere on the walls. Gentile/Jew/Roman/Samaritan; Saint/Sinner; Clean/Unclean; Male/Female; Rich/Poor; High class/Low class; Christian/Muslim; Heterosexual/Homosexual.

All are afraid. All are in boxes. All refuse to play the game. Who is this bird? Why, the Holy Spirit, of course. The Holy Spirit is hovering over the social chess board, and the winds of change are beginning to blow. And then we notice that the dove, the Holy Spirit, has a partner on the ground.

A new player has come on the scene. He has a disturbing way of disturbing the many boxes. He keeps shouting, “let’s play”. In fact, he seems to be creating a new way to play the game, a whole new set of rules, a co-operative approach where you help each other rather than compete against each other.

It’s like Aslan, the lion figure in Narnia, breathing a life giving breath on all the people turned into pillars of stone, turning them again into living beings.

This new player in first century Palestine isn’t impressed with the “Keep-out” signs or the labels describing who is inside and who is outside. He seems to be in league with the bird. Astonishingly, he

moves over the entire chess board with ease, playing social chess, breaking open one box after the other, or moving them around, not to eliminate them, but to get them interacting. He brings the entire board into action, and despite the seeming chaos, there does seem to be purpose and direction to what's happening. There is movement over the entire social landscape. Walls are tumbling down. Boxes are being torn open, though some players quickly rebuild new protective walls.

As many of the texts keep on saying, "The Kingdom of God is breaking out all over the place." And when the Kingdom of God breaks in it always seems to break down dividing walls.

## The Story

Today I want to walk through the story recorded in John 4, a particularly good example of New Kingdom chess. The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is rich with good news about breaking out of old boxes. The woman, a mere pawn, becomes – becomes a celebrated evangelist of new kingdom life.

This is a story that is totally implausible, given the social context of that time. The barriers between Jesus and the woman – and between the woman and any self-respecting Jew – should have been insurmountable. There should have been no encounter at all, let alone a conversation.

### Box one – The racial box

In the first place, the woman was a Samaritan. "He (Jesus) left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria".

Permit a short geography lesson. The map of Israel from those days would have shown the land of Israel to be divided into three sections. To the south was Judea, which included Jerusalem. To the north was Galilee, home base for Jesus. And in the middle separating them, was Samaria. When Jews travelled from one Jewish province to the other – from Judah to Samaria or vice versa - they almost always went around Samaria. Far too dangerous to go through it. They would cross over the Jordan River to the East and avoid going through Samaria, though it would take an extra 2 ½ or 3 days travelling time. This was well worth it. Samaria was foreign, unclean land.

There had been a centuries' long hostility between Samaritans and Jews. Ever since the fall of Samaria in 722 BC, pure Jews accused Samaritans of being impure Jews. They were a product of racial mixing and blending, a policy forced on them by their Assyrian conquerors.

Samaritans were of mixed race. They were impure. And therefore they were unclean. They did of course share some of the same Scriptures with the Jews. But only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. They stopped there. They did not consider the Prophets as Holy Scripture.

But there was another huge irritant. Alexander the Great, when he ruled them, had allowed the Samaritans to build their own temple on Mount Gerizim, a rival temple to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. This will play into our story from John 4.

The story begins by saying that Jesus had to go through Samaria. Chose to is probably more accurate. There was a bigger purpose in going through Samaria.

"So he (Jesus) came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon".

This is a place rich with tradition and culture and faith for the Jews. It is a great heritage site. But it is out of bounds. It is a sacred site on foreign soil.

“When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, ‘will you give me a drink’”? His disciples had gone into town to buy food.

The “Keep out” sign on the Samaritan-Jew” box does not keep Jesus out.

Box two: The gender box

An equally large diving box which should have kept Jesus and this water drawer separate was the gender box, the male-female box. The rules were absolutely clear. Outside the home males and females did not relate to each other. Especially if they were strangers. Especially if the male was a Rabi. Especially if the woman was of conspicuously lowly status with large hints of scandal surrounding her.

“A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. She said to him, ‘how is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria’”? She knows the rules, knows that this request for water should never have happened. But she also seems to have some spunk. She will challenge this stranger.

Women were treated as inferior in that culture. The Jewish male would pray every day thanking God that he had not been created a foreigner or a woman. Women were not recognized as full humans. At the birth of a boy there was great joy. A baby girl brought disappointment. Women were not allowed to study the Holy Scriptures. They could not enter the sacred area of the inner temple. They could not be a witness at a trial because their word was not considered trustworthy. A man could easily divorce his wife. The wife did not have that recourse. It was a very patriarchal, male dominated world.

As is much of our world today, including our Christian world. No women priests? Until very recently no women pastors?

“How can you, a Jewish man, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? Indeed how could Jesus have asked that?

I’m impressed by the spunk and courage this woman had. The social norms would insist that when she saw a foreign man anywhere close by she should have run away as fast as she could.

We begin to be intrigued by this encounter that should never have happened.

Box three: The inner protection box

There is also an inner self-protection box. Which Jesus breaks open. Says Jesus to the woman, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘give me a drink’, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

The woman has shown enormous courage and spunk in even just conversing with Jesus. But her inner defenses are still well guarded – the smile on the outside, fear and pain on the inside. Living water? This stranger seems to be taking her seriously as a person. But why get into such heavy stuff so quickly. Living water? Try some light banter to deflect a bit. “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep.”

Jesus doesn't play the safe, bantering social games with her, the "I am fine, how are you" routines. He responds, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Powerful words. Too powerful for the woman. If this keeps up the inner mask will crumble. Better force the banter again, play it safe again. "Fine then, sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty again, and that I don't have to keep coming here to draw water at noon so that the other towns women can avoid me."

Part avoidance. But maybe also part hope. Could this really be? She is both afraid of these words and yet drawn to them. Can she both protect her heart, and open her heart at the same time?

#### Box 4: The sinner box

But there is another box imbedded deep in this conversation. Sinner box. This woman has been labeled "sinner". Labeled by her townspeople - and mostly by us readers of the story. The story of the woman at the well is a story of a sinner, isn't it, woman of five husbands, no doubt a prostitute. At first it seems that Jesus too is seeing her as "sinner".

"Go", says Jesus, "Go, call your husband, and come back".

That comes as a jolt. Maybe this Jesus is no different than all the other men. "I as a woman don't count. Got to have a man to count for anything. Give this living water to a husband and maybe some of it will trickle through to the wife".

And yet, that doesn't seem to be it. There seems to be no rejection in the command. Okay, blurt it out defiantly. "I have no husband". There, it is said, you who hold a mirror to my inner self. Now finally this stranger with the penetrating eyes will abandon me, and leave me alone, and not mess with my inner life.

"You are right in saying, 'I have no husband', for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

What pain in those words. And what truth. Truth, but still no rejection, still no animosity, no revulsion. Simply truth - a truth that can be freeing. Just consider that culture for a moment. A woman cannot divorce her husband. Only a husband can divorce his wife, easily, almost casually. Five men have divorced her. They have used her and discarded her. She is far more victim than sinner. If anything, the husbands are the sinners, forcing her into a life on the margins struggling just to survive.

The woman is torn between hope and terror. This man, this prophet sees too deeply inside of her heart. And yet there seems to be no judgment in that seeing. Better try once more to get onto safer ground. Start a theological debate - already an indication of how spunky and probably intelligent this woman is.

"You know that our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, in our holy temple. But you Jews say that the only really holy place to worship is in Jerusalem, in your temple there." Engage in a centuries' long debate and argument, a classic focal point of hostility between Jews and Samaritans.

Now we'll see his true colors, the real prejudices of this Jewish prophet conversing with a Samaritan woman.

"Neither", says Jesus. "True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

It is not the sacred site that is important. It isn't the Samaritan temple or the Jewish temple. Worship can be done anywhere, and everywhere. Worship in spirit and in truth. Worship is our spirit meeting God's Spirit. It is encountering God from the depth of our being. It is listening to God, loving God, being touched by God's spirit. It is being changed, renewed, transformed. Powerful words for that woman. Powerful words for us.

Says the woman, "I know that Messiah is coming (who is called the Christ). When he comes, he will proclaim all to us."

"I am he", says Jesus, "the one who is speaking to you".

And then it finally all makes sense. Of course. And with that comes a flood of recognition. With that comes deep understanding. There is a flood of healing. She takes a deep thirst-quenching drink of the living water.

And becomes an evangelist. She can no longer be contained, or silenced. She rushes off to tell the townspeople what she has heard and what she has experienced. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

This woman was an object of ridicule in the town. She has been totally marginalized, shoved into a corner, into a box. But nothing can stop her now. She excitedly announces to her people that she has experienced some living water offered by this Jewish Messiah. And they too run to the well to see and to experience that for themselves. And many of them too are convinced. In the end they say, "We know that this is truly the Saviour of the world".

## Conclusion

I want to offer two very simple and yet exceedingly complex applications from this story – applications for this season of lent. The first one is what you can give up for lent. The second is what you can embrace for lent.

- 1) What you can give up. Let go of living in safe boxes. Risk playing new Kingdom chess. See the Holy Spirit bird hovering over your world. Follow the Nazarene chess master who moves over the whole big picture chess board, breaking open box after box, barrier after barrier, prejudice after prejudice, to get people interacting, and engaging each other and loving each other. Risk opening your boxes. Risk opening your thoughts and lives and faith to people different from you, people who disagree with you, people you may even really not like very much. Risk forgiving people who have hurt you. Risk engaging the people you would rather avoid. Give up building walls of protection.
- 2) What you can embrace. Drink more deeply of the living water Jesus offers. Lent is far more than what we give up. Lent is to nurture our spirit, our faith, our capacity to love God and each other. That, as Sue Barnes reminded us, can only be done through prayer, through opening our lives

more fully to God, through embracing as fully as we know how the love that flows from the cross of Jesus. What is your deepest thirst at this point in your life? Is it a thirst for deeper relationships, deeper friendships, a deeper marriage in order to address some of your loneliness? Is it a thirst for deeper self-acceptance, a deeper self-love? Is your pressing thirst one for a deeper sense of meaning and purpose to your life, a purpose that is easily pushed aside as we go through the motions of running from one task to the other in the frantic pace of living. Is your thirst one for healing from pain – the pain of a broken relationship or a broken spirit.

Or is your deep thirst for a closer walk with God, an awareness of God's presence and blessing and peace in your life? Name your thirst. Bring that thirst to God. Drink deeply of living water.