

Only the Lonely

2nd Sunday in Lent – March 3/4, 2007

Sermon Background Study

John 4:7-24 (NRSV)

[When Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees begins to heat up, he leaves Judea and heads north to Galilee. Jesus chooses to go through the area called Samaria. It is the most direct route to Galilee, but because Jews generally despised the Samaritans, they often avoided this "enemy" territory. Jesus comes to a small village and finds a woman there alone – at noon.]

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "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." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus welcomes everyone to his table, especially the outcasts and the lonely. When a Samaritan woman encounters Jesus, she responds in faith and finds a new home.

A woman at the well at noon? Something is wrong with this picture. Women went to the well in the cool of the morning or the evening, but not at noon. Yet, there she is.

Meeting Jesus

Though no one outside the village would know why the woman is there at noon, Jesus knows. But he soon fills the woman's head with questions of her own. Jesus asks her for water, though Jews avoided Samaritans and would never drink from their cup or eat from their plate. And he is a man. It was very improper for a Jewish man to be seen alone with any woman and unthinkable that he should speak with her. All this surely set her head spinning.

And then, Jesus begins to talk with her about some kind of water that forever banishes thirst and has something to with eternal life. Who could blame her for focusing on the straight-forward possibility of never having to carry water from the well again.

"Son of Man"

As you read through John's gospel, you will find that Jesus refers to himself repeatedly as the "Son of Man." At the end of chapter 1, Nathaniel is astounded that Jesus saw him praying under a fig tree when Jesus was no where around. But Jesus tells Nathaniel that he will see "far greater things than these . . . you will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). Using powerful imagery from the story of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:10-22) and from Daniel 7, Jesus tells Nathaniel all that he needs to know to grasp what he will soon see and hear and experience as Jesus' disciple.

Because we proclaim Jesus to be fully God and fully human, it is understandable that we often take "Son of Man" to be a statement about Jesus' humanity, making "Son of God" a statement about Jesus' divinity. But "Son of Man" is not a cryptic way of saying that Jesus is human. Rather, it is a powerful image drawn from Daniel 7:13-14.

The book of Daniel was very popular and influential in Jesus' day, for good reason. Daniel is about the faithfulness of God toward those who remain faithful to God in the face of intimidation and threats. Daniel is set in Babylon during the exile. Daniel and his friends refuse to accommodate their faith in the LORD God to the culture and religion of the Babylonians. They stay resolute. Through God's intervention, Daniel's friends are rescued from the fiery furnace and Daniel isn't eaten by lions after being tossed in their den.

(continued on page 2)

Then we learn why she is there at mid-day when no one else comes to the well. She has had five husbands and is currently living with a man to whom she is not even married. She comes at noon to avoid the smirks and snickers of the other women in the village. She lives a lonely life, socially cut-off in a world driven by family and community.

Not surprisingly, she quickly gets over her astonishment that Jesus knows these things about her and tries to change the subject. Isn't that so like us all. When we get close to the heart of the matter, when we begin talking about something that makes us uncomfortable, we try to shift the conversation elsewhere.

Son of Man (cont. from page 1)

The Romans were the “Babylonians” of first-century Judea. It was Roman soldiers who stood guard over the temple during the big Jewish festivals. It was Roman governors who desecrated the temple from time to time.

Daniel 7 opens with dramatic images of all those who threaten Israel. These opponents are monsters rising up from the sea of chaos. But in v. 13-14, we meet the “Son of Man” (translated “one like a human being” in the NRSV). This Son of Man is Israel’s rescuer and vindicator. The Son of Man comes before the Ancient One (God) to be given dominion over all creation. By referring to himself as the Son of Man, Jesus reveals that he is Israel’s rescuer and that he is Lord.

“I am he” or “I am”?

If you read on a few verses in the story of the Samaritan woman, you’ll see that she ends the conversation about worship with a sort of “we’ll see.” The Messiah will come someday, she says, and answer all these questions. In response, Jesus says, in the NRSV translation, “I am he,” staking claim to messiahship. Yet the Greek doesn’t say, “I am he,” it says “I am” (*ego eimi*).

This comes up so often in John’s gospel that it is hard for me to believe that John wants us to see nothing more than self-identification here. “I am” is the name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. God is the great I AM. When Jesus responds, “*ego eimi*,” it is a bold connection with the divine name. Later in the gospel, when arresting officers ask Jesus whether he is Jesus of Nazareth, he again responds “*ego eimi*” – and everyone falls to the ground. They understand the larger meaning of Jesus’ response.

In addition to the seven well-known I AM statements of Jesus (“I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” and so on), there are seven other bold, yet simple, I AM/*ego eimi* claims (4:26, 6:20, 8:24, 8:28, 8:58, 13:19, 18:7).

The woman begins to talk about worship, especially the “where” of worship. I guess that shouldn’t surprise us either. We can get pretty caught up in the importance of this spot of land or that one, in one building or another. Certainly, Jesus’ fellow Jews were often so focused on the importance of The Land, that they failed to see God’s working in all the world. So, Jesus tries to help her see that worship is not about the “where” but the “who.” What matters is not where the woman worships, on the mountain or in Jerusalem, but that she worship the true God. And as we learn in John’s gospel, God is revealed fully only in Jesus Christ.

What or whom do we worship? N.T. Wright is on the mark when he says that we become what we worship. Worship money and we become greedy. Worship sex and we become lustful. But worship the LORD God and we become Christlike. And as the story proceeds, the woman and many of her fellow Samaritans come to embrace Jesus as the “who.” Indeed, it is Samaritans, not Jews, who proclaim Jesus to be not merely the Messiah but to be the “Savior of the world” (4:42).

New life

John’s gospel is built on a series of encounters. Person after person meets Jesus and the questions are always the same: Who is Jesus and what is their response? Some believe¹ and some don’t.

The Samaritan woman believes. We don’t really know why. Is it Jesus’ knowing things he can’t know? Or does she see in Jesus the Word? Regardless, she goes and tells others her good news, and they believe. Indeed, these Samaritans are so excited that they ask Jesus to stick around and he does, for two days, during which time “many more believed because of his word” (4:41). No longer was their believing the result of the woman’s testimony, but because of what they had heard for themselves. Do we hear the Word?

Because these people were Samaritans, despised by the Jews, it is easy for us to grasp that when Jesus offers this woman new life, he is offering it to all. Though Jesus is a Jew, his vocation is for the whole world. This story echoes John the Baptist’s exclamation when he sees Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29). In Christ, we discover the God whom we are to worship.

¹The word “believe (believed/believing)” is used in John nearly 100 times! It translates the Greek verb form of the word “faith/*pistis*.” It would be better if we said “faithing,” but we’ve lost the verb form of “faith” in the English language, so we use “believing” instead. In John, the noun “faith” is never used, the emphasis is completely on the action – trusting in, believing in, Jesus.

Reading With Heart & Mind

March 4 - 10

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday John 5:1-18 Jesus heals a crippled man on the Sabbath. What does this story reveal about Jesus? About God? Note that “the Jews” is John’s way of referring to the Jewish leaders, not to all Jews. After all, Jesus was Jewish.</p>	<p>Monday John 5:19-46 Typically, Jesus delivers a discourse after the confrontation with the Pharisees. What do the Father and Son share? What do you think Jesus means when he says that the hour is “now here, when the dead will hear the voice of God” (5:25)? What and who testifies to Jesus?</p>
<p>Tuesday John 6:1-21 Jesus feeds thousands (it is five thousand men) with a few loaves and fishes and he walks on water. What does the miracle of the feeding have in common with our practice of Holy Communion?</p>	<p>Wednesday John 6:22-71 Jesus takes the OT imagery of God’s feeding his people and reshapes it around himself. It will be helpful to read Exodus 16. Why do people reject Jesus? He is even abandoned by some of his followers!</p>
<p>Thursday John 7:1-24 Chapter 7 is a series of episodes depicting the rising opposition to Jesus. How bad do things get? Find three statements by Jesus that you think many of the people would have found most upsetting.</p>	<p>Friday John 7:25-36 Why do people think Jesus can’t be the Messiah?</p>
<p>Saturday John 7:37-52 Why don’t the temple police arrest Jesus? It is important to see how much Jesus’ messiahship differs from the people’s expectations.</p>	

Sermon Notes

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Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected.

If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In her commentary in *The New Interpreters Bible*, Gail O'Day points out that the story of the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus is a lengthy and skillfully written narrative. We are drawn into the story. We are surprised when we learn of the five husbands. We can imagine ourselves having trouble understanding Jesus. We can ask ourselves whether we would respond as she did - by believing. You might read the entire story again, 4:1-42. Where can you find yourself in this story? Try to imagine yourself as the woman or even the disciples, who seem blind to what is happening. What if someone came to your home telling you stories about a man who knows things he can't possibly know? Would you respond like the Samaritan villagers? God has given us these richly textured stories so that we can step within them, not try to reduce them to a teaching point or a few timeless nuggets.

We tend to be quite skilled at erecting boundaries around groups of people. Like the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, the shock (at least to the Jews) in this story is built on the fact that it is the hated Samaritans, of all people, who are the first to flock to Jesus, proclaiming him "Savior of the world." This story tears down such ethnic boundaries. It also tears down barriers between men and women. Jesus doesn't care that he is speaking to a woman alone - or perhaps he has picked her for that very reason. In the gospels, you can always count on Jesus' inviting in the people we'd think would be the last ones to be invited. What lines do we draw? What lines have you seen taken down in your lifetime? What lines have you seen erected? Has there been a time when you were on the outside, part of the out-group rather than the in-group? What do you think Jesus would say about our unending need to put people in groups?

Finally, you might reflect on exactly whom it is we worship. If we become what or whom we worship, how do we know that we are truly worshiping the true God? What in our lives competes for our worship? Why is it so important that we worship together? The Samaritan woman's loneliness was overcome as she was accepted into the growing community of Samaritan believers. How can our own worship overcome loneliness?