

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE BEST KIND

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**2) The Samaritan Woman**

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During this season of Lent, we are considering six close encounters of the best kind that Jesus has with certain individuals in the Gospel of John. Last week, we began our journey by focusing our attention on Jesus' encounter with the religious leader, Nicodemus, under the cover of darkness. If you were with us, you may recall that we considered the ways in which the duties and responsibilities of "organized religion" can become obstacles that prevent us from experiencing the power of God's Spirit directly in our lives.

In our lesson, this morning, from the fourth chapter of John's Gospel, we read of Jesus' "close encounter" with the Samaritan woman. The contrast between these two encounters could not be greater. Nicodemus, of course, was a religious leader, highly respected, well compensated, and a man of unquestioned authority. Not only that, but he had a name.

This woman, however, does not have a name. She has no title, no prestige, and no social capital. She has at least two strikes against her in first century society. She is a woman and as if that were not bad enough, she is a Samaritan woman—a double whammy, if you will.

To refresh your memory, the Jews and Samaritans did not like each other. Although they were originally linked together as one people, growing tensions between north and south eventually led to their separation and a fierce enmity. Any self-respecting Jew would have nothing to do with the Samaritans as they were considered unclean. The divide between these two peoples was so great Jews would not even set foot in Samaria on their travels, but would go miles out of their way to avoid contamination.

This then, is the cultural context for this encounter that takes place between Jesus, the Jew and this nameless Samaritan woman. Not surprisingly, Jesus refused to abide by the religious rules that called for the separation and exclusion of the Samaritans. Jesus' journey takes him through—not around—Samaria and it is there, at a well dug by his ancestor Jacob, that he encounters this Samaritan woman.

John tells us that this encounter takes place in the bright light of mid-day. This is noteworthy because you will remember that the literary premise of John's Gospel is that Jesus, the light of the world, came into the world to help people see—not only literally in a physical sense, but also, metaphorically, in a spiritual sense. The fact that this conversation begins not at night, as was the case with Nicodemus, but in the bright light of noonday is significant as this is John's way of suggesting that Jesus is about his intended work—that of bringing light to those who walk in darkness.

The darkness in which this woman walked, however, is not easily determined. While there are those who have interpreted this text to suggest that the woman was of questionable moral character—perhaps even a prostitute who came to the well when no one else was around for the sake of her own shame—there is really nothing in John's description that would support this conclusion. Jesus' reference to her five former husbands does not

necessarily imply moral failure on her part. Given the patriarchal nature of the time and the second class status of women, her “fault” may have been that she was a woman who was forced into one dependent relationship after another in order to merely survive. Once again, we can only speculate.

Whatever the case, the choice to place our focus on the woman’s morality is to miss the intended thrust of the story. Perhaps it is enough to suggest that the woman had known her share of disappointment and struggle, that her life had not been easy and that she had never quite been able to experience a true sense of wholeness and self-worth.

The conversation begins when Jesus asks her for a drink of water. She is stunned that he, a male Jew would actually risk talking with her, a female Samaritan. Without question, he was risking being labeled as “unclean” by those who kept track of such things. Jesus then offers a somewhat mysterious response: ***“If you knew the gift of God and it was that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” (John 4:10)***

As was the case with Nicodemus, Jesus is speaking metaphorically and the woman is thinking literally. ***“You have nothing with which to draw water from this deep well. Where do you get this living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well and drank from it?” (John 4: 11-12)***

This question then sets the table for Jesus’ primary teaching point: ***“Everyone who drinks from this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I provide will never thirst. It will become a spring of water welling up into eternal life.” (John 4: 13-14)***

Once again, the woman is thinking literally as she says to Jesus: ***“Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” (John 4: 15)***

At this point, Jesus invites her to call her husband and come back. She replies that she has no husband and he, in turn, suggests that she has spoken correctly, that she has had five husbands and that the man she is now with is not her husband. Perhaps a bit unnerved by Jesus’ knowledge of her past, she says to him: ***“Sir,” I can see that you are a prophet.***

Keep in mind that the writer of John is weaving throughout this narrative the underlying theme of blindness and sight. The fact that the woman “can see” should not go unnoticed. This comment provides us with a clue that suggests that she is beginning to “see” or understand just who Jesus is—not fully, to be sure—but, at least, partially.

Given this emerging understanding, she then proceeds to raise a theological question for discussion—one that addressed the matter of God’s preferred residence. While Jews insisted that God could only be worshipped on Mt. Zion in the Temple at Jerusalem, the Samaritans believed that it was only on their own mountain—Mt. Gerizim—that God could be worshipped. The woman wants to know Jesus’ thoughts about the true place of worship.

Jesus, however quickly makes it clear that God is bigger than this provincial thinking that has divided Jew and Samaritan. God will not be restricted in the narrow definitions of

proper worship that have been used in the past. In the newly emerging age, says Jesus, true worship will not be defined by location or cultural tradition or preference. Instead, it will be defined by honest worship that doesn't hide behind pretense or posturing, but seeks to be open and authentic—that is, real—before God.

The woman then acknowledges that the Messiah would be coming and that he would explain all of these mysteries upon his arrival. Jesus then, for the first time in the Gospel of John, identifies himself as the Messiah who has come: **“I who speak to you am he,”** he says to her.

With this bold announcement in place, the writer then tells us that the disciples return from their mission of buying food. They are stunned to see Jesus in conversation with this Samaritan woman, but they were afraid to say anything.

Perhaps sensing the disciples' discomfort, the woman then takes that opportunity to make her exit, leaving her water jar behind as she returns to the town to tell others about her encounter with Jesus: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Is it possible that he might be the Messiah?”

This announcement, on her part, was intriguing enough to the people of the village that they chose to go see and hear for themselves. It is then in John's narrative (verses 31-38) that Jesus and the disciples share in a teaching moment in which Jesus suggests that there is a great harvest at hand and it is his work and their work to bring in the harvest.

John's narrative then concludes by providing tangible evidence of that harvest. We learn that many in the town **“believed in him because of the woman's testimony.”** We then learn that Jesus stayed two more days with them and **“many more believed because of his word.”** They then told 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.” (Verse 42)**

There are, of course, many lessons that can be drawn from this fascinating conversation. One could note the refusal of Jesus to be bound by the boundaries of gender, race or religion—an important lesson to be sure in our own time and place.

But, from my perspective, I believe that it is the witness of this woman herself that is one that is worth our attention and focus. Keeping in mind that she occupied one of the lowest rungs of the social ladder, it is, I believe, a remarkable thing to realize that she became not only one of Jesus' disciples, but one of the first true evangelists—one of the very first people in John's gospel to give witness to the “good news” of Jesus Christ.

In contrast to Nicodemus who remained largely “under cover” in his witness to his fledgling faith, this woman did not waste any time in “getting the word out!” She was so excited by this conversation, so enthusiastic by her encounter with Jesus that she left her water jar behind. She was on a mission that became more important to her than the ordinary duties

and responsibilities of her day to day life. She could see in a way that she had never seen before and she couldn't wait to help others see as well—"Come and see," she said.

If those words sound familiar that because they are. It is in the first chapter of John's Gospel that Jesus invites Andrew and another would be disciple to "come and see" for themselves where Jesus is staying. And it is then Phillip who invites Nathaniel to "come and see" Jesus for himself. And here, just three chapters later, it is the least likely of candidates—a woman who happened to be a Samaritan—who chooses to this same invitation with the people of her village. She has tasted living water and wanted others to taste it too.

Can you imagine the joy that she felt? The energy she possessed? The conviction that stirred within her? Can you imagine feeling that way about your own faith? About your own encounter with Jesus? I hope that you can because, to put it quite simply, the future of this and every church depends upon it.

Sometimes we can get so bogged down with the disappointments of life, so burdened with the demands and responsibilities of every day that, like this woman, we can find ourselves going through life's routine without much joy in the present or hope for the future. We go to the well—or the supermarket, as the case may be, to provide for our daily needs, not expecting anything but more of the same.

But then suddenly, there is a moment, an encounter, a conversation unexpected and we are invited to see...to see that there is something more to life, that there is a love that God has for us that wells up and will not be denied to any and all who thirst for it. And once we have tasted it, once we have experienced this love for ourselves, the most natural thing in the world is to want to share it with someone else—to leave our water jars behind and run to invite others to "come and see" this Jesus...to come and taste the living water he offers

**Bill Eassum** has said that, "**Good news comes to us on its way to someone else.**" And that is, I believe, exactly right. Once we have experienced good news, once we have tasted living water, the most natural thing we can do is to share it with others. We are called, if you will, to be conduits of the electrical charge of the Gospel. We are called to be transmitters of the current of God's love.

The witness of this nameless Samaritan woman serves to remind us that one of our basic assignments as followers of Jesus is simply to allow the good news of God's love to be transmitted in and through us...in what we say, in what we do and who we are. While some may want to debate just who is acceptable to God or where God chooses to reside, we have more important work to do: We have living water to share with many who are weak from thirst.

And that is, I believe, something worth getting excited about...so excited that we actually leave our water jars behind. Amen.