

John 4: 7-15 “How Is It...?” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/12/23

I have come to the realization that there are some questions I may never get answered. Such as, “How is it that there are interstate highways in Hawaii?” “How is it, after snowstorms like we have had, that snowplow drivers in places like Tahoe get to work?” “How is it that the word phonetic isn’t spelled the way it sounds?” and “How is it that when you transport something by car, it is called a shipment, but when you transport something by ship, it is called cargo?” I mean, how does one explain such things? The same happens within the continuation of our story of the Samaritan woman at the well, as she asks Jesus, “How is it that you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?”

The setting of our story was reviewed a couple weeks ago, because any time you read a Bible story, it is important to understand its context. We were reminded that this story comes shortly after Jesus’ words to Nick at Nite, otherwise known as Nicodemus, as Jesus pronounces, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” Our story takes place at noon, the brightest time of day, near a well, a popular location for significant relationship encounters in the Bible. It involves a woman, whose name we don’t know but still she has the longest conversation with Jesus of any biblical character, even though Jews and Samaritans never were to communicate. She is one who has secrets to hide, but who still needs water every day to live. She is one whose inner life is shrouded in darkness, but who is walking toward the Light. She is one whose well-being is parched with thirst, but who is moving toward Living Water. She is one whose gender, social status, and ethnic identity would have consigned her to darkness. She is the mirror opposite of Nicodemus, who found himself in limbo between night and day and then ultimately leaves the

light of Jesus' presence to live in perpetual twilight. How is it that this woman approaches Jacob's well in broad daylight, which is rarely done because of the warm climate, and potentially connects on a spiritual level with Jesus? On the surface, it seems like a basic question, but it comes with hidden layers we are invited to gradually unpeel.

Why her, why now? Karoline Lewis notes that some preachers assert this woman had to go to the well at noon, when no one else would be around, because she was a sinner, an outcast, having had five husbands and now cohabitating with a man who is not her husband. No one wants to associate with such a sinful, immoral woman. However, the problem with this assessment is that there is no basis for thinking of the woman in such a way. The story never comments on her sinfulness, in fact, sin is never even brought up. Jesus never condemns nor judges her. Yet, tradition has labeled her the evil woman who sexually ensnares men and provokes infidelity. If we think about the story objectively, we can see the inherent misogyny here towards single women, which has been borne down through the ages. Even to this day, some churches refuse to hire a single woman minister not because of the misinterpretation that women should be silent in the church, but because of the fear that she will sexually seduce others in her church, something never mentioned about men. Back to our story, though...how is it that in the heat of the day, this woman and this man arrive at the well at the same time? What possibilities might there be for her, meeting the Light of the World at the brightest time of the day? This story begs for inquiry not for condemnation or forgone conclusions.

The time of day, as the gospel author John presents it, indicates possibility and purpose, not prejudice and prejudgment. The woman's question gives voice to the trappings of her society – the boundaries and borders that separated people and oppressed her in particular,

and still do today. John adds a note that the disciples have left Jesus to go buy food which means he is now alone with this Samaritan woman, something a Jewish religious leader would have shunned at all costs. John wants us to see the scandal which is occurring right before our eyes and how Jesus isn't even fazed by it. Jesus is far more interested in entering into a conversation with the woman that will build a relationship of inclusion and unconditional love. Like Nicodemus, however, the woman still resides in the literal world while engaging with Jesus. "How is it that you, Jesus, are going to give me some water to drink?" On the surface, once again a very basic question – Jesus has no bucket and the well is deep... where will he get this living water? "How is it that you appear to be greater than our father Jacob, who gave this well to us, and drank from it himself?" How does that work? The question addresses one of the most important themes of John's gospel – Jesus' identity. It is Jesus' identity that will be revealed to the woman in time and if she is willing to remain in the conversation, in this budding relationship long enough, she will come to see just who he really is. Jesus answers her question not with a test or trap but with the hope to draw her further into dialogue. "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life."

Who wouldn't be curious after a statement like that? Jesus wants her to realize that water itself, and the reasons she came to the well in the first place, are not the issue. Like the signs in Jesus' ministry so far, when he turns water into wine, when he feeds the 5000, and now providing living water, they are all signs which point to what really matters. Wells eventually dry up, after a while, as some Californians learned last summer, and you have to dig another one. The water Jesus offers, however, is like an underground spring – think Old Faithful at

Yellowstone – a spring that never runs dry. In Greek, “bubbles up” indicates an ongoing reality, a perpetual state, an unending source of water. Building on themes from the First Testament, Jesus provides ever-flowing water from a wilderness rock and daily bread, like manna from the sky.

Jesus offers the woman what she needs – water, essential for life and survival, and yet, Jesus offers her so much more – life abundant. This, she has yet to see, she has yet to recognize, but she’s getting there. In her past, she knew her place very well and no one ever let her forget it; maybe you know what that feels like, maybe you know what it is to question your own worth, your purpose in the world? Society places expectations on us with ideals that are not achievable, but we still strive for them anyway. How we look, how much we weigh, how much money we make, how perfect our family is... We ask how is it that God sends God’s own Son to show us we are enough, we are worthy of love? How is it indeed? It is no accident that this encounter at the well is a conversation. If Jesus showed up and said, “Guess what? I’m the Son of God!” I doubt the story would have been the same. It takes time to get to know someone, to understand their identity, to open ourselves up to the possibility of relationship. So Jesus takes his time and so will we... the story will continue.