

John 3: 16-17; 4: 1-6 “The Setting” Rev. Janet Chapman 2/26/23

In reviewing places to journey last summer in conjunction with my sabbatical, I was amused to read traveler’s assessments of famous locations. You may want to keep these in mind if you ever take a journey outside the States. There were the usuals that you would expect and then every once in awhile, along came a review that caught my attention. For the Roman Colosseum, one tourist noted, “the place was in ruins; it was so old two-thirds of it was in shambles, like it hadn’t been used in years; none of the seats remained and I had to stand the whole time.” The Sistine Chapel garnered the review, “What a waste of time – the guy hung upside down for 4 years painting for what?” From visiting Rome’s Trevi Fountain, I almost agreed with the assessment: “Cobblestones, crowded, concrete, crowded, gelato, crowded, water, crowded, very hot, and oh yeah, did I mention crowded? Not a place I need to visit again.” For Venice’s Grand Canal, one woman wrote she was very disappointed that she didn’t get to see it as the place was under water. With regards to Pompeii, one noted it was just another tourist trap with dead bodies and broken pottery; for unbroken pottery, consider Pottery Barn. Finally, Stonehenge was far too expensive to just look at some rocks and the Louvre was a mall without exits, so I left those two out altogether.

Last Wednesday, Christians began a journey of a different sort which ends with Holy Week and Easter Sunday. This year, our journey will reflect around one story in the Bible, one character having a conversation with Jesus, but not just any conversation, but the longest recorded dialogue Jesus has with anyone. For such an honor, you would think we would know her name, but we don’t. She could be any one of us, as the many different perspectives addressed in the whole story help us to see a part of ourselves. The story of the Woman at the well found in John 4: 1-42 will become our Lenten backdrop for the next 6 Sundays to help us gain a better sense of our own experiences of God. Her story will remind us that our story matters; after all, she is not an “official disciple,” not included on any of Jesus’ lists; she doesn’t have all the answers, she doesn’t even go looking for Jesus; Jesus goes looking for her. We come to see that Jesus collects followers as he travels, often the most unlikely and unexpected individuals, without discrimination or particular gifts. Then he sends those followers out into the world because, as Jesus said, God so loved the world.

A piece of that world is pictured on your bulletin, a map of where most of the action in the Gospels takes place. In Matthew, Mark & Luke, Jesus' ministry seems to take place over the course of a year and all in the region of Galilee at the top of the map. However, in John, we are told that Jesus travels to Jerusalem for the annual Jewish pilgrimage feasts, which a devout Jewish male would do, three separate times. John takes care to show Jesus as a faithful and observant Jew which counters the false interpretations that justify anti-semitism because of this Gospel. Whenever John describes conflicts between Jesus and quote "the Jews" unquote, we must always insert the words "Jewish leaders" or "Jewish authorities" who didn't understand Jesus' identity or mission. There is no room anywhere in the Bible for tolerance of antisemitism. Additionally, it is John's Gospel that alludes to a three-year ministry for Jesus because of three different references to him being in Jerusalem for Passover, as he is at the beginning of our text. Today, we are setting the stage for Jesus' longest dialogue because when you read the Bible, you should always pay attention to the setting. This information is not accidental but provides background and meaning. Sometimes the smallest of details reveal the biggest impact. Location is part of our experience, part of our meaningful memories – it's about location, location, location. So the place is Jerusalem and it is where Jesus meets Nicodemus and says those all-important and memorable words, *"For God so loved the world..."*.

These words will take on even more significance as we delve into the story. Having celebrated Passover, Jesus then heads home to Galilee, about 40 miles away. Verse 4 says that Jesus had to go through Samaria, but here's the thing... he didn't. If you look at the map, you will note that there are two other routes between the northern and southern regions of Palestine – either along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea or along the Jordan River valley. No Jew would ever travel straight north through Samaria for fear of coming into contact with a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans had a complex history marked by animosity. It dated back to 722 BCE when Assyria split the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel. Unlike the Judean Jews, the Samaritans were not deported by Assyria and ended up inter-marrying with Assyrians and later with their Babylonian captors. This made them unclean in the eyes of the Jews. The split grew wider when each group built their own separate temples to worship

Yahweh. So why does Jesus not take one of the more acceptable routes? Because, as Karoline Lewis notes, location matters... and Jesus' words to Nicodemus matter as he says, *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..."* When Jesus shares this truth about his mission and ministry, he isn't hoping it will end up on a poster someday at a football game or stuck on the back of a car bumper, he is counting on bringing God's love to the world. God loves all of the world, all of creation, and so Jesus intentionally takes his disciples through Samaria to show them what the world looks like and who the world is. The world, in this case, is the last person on the planet you would think God could love – a woman, a foreigner, and a Samaritan who has been shunned and shamed for her marital history. Can you imagine what the disciples must have thought, what they whispered to one another? "Wait, we're going where?" But Jesus wants them to understand just whom God truly loves because they will be called to do the same, and the only way to do that was to take them through Samaria to Sychar, the home of Jacob's well.

The presence of wells in the First Testament has great significance. Not only are they sources of water but they were often the setting of betrothal scenes. Isaac & Rebekah, Jacob & Leah, and Moses & Zipporah all met and became engaged at a well. Of course, Jesus doesn't go to a well to find his future wife but the backdrop signifies a place of relationship, promise, and hope; a place where conversation can become transformative and even intimate. It is also a place where human needs are met – Jesus is thirsty and tired, he needs water; the woman needs inclusion, forgiveness, and belonging. She has come to draw water, a twice-daily job for women in ancient Palestine, but Jesus will offer her living water. Their mutual needs bring them to Jacob's well at noon, when the sun is at its highest point in the sky, full and bright.

This is another one of those small details with huge impact. The time of day directly contrasts with Jesus' last conversation with Nicodemus which occurs in the middle of the night. "Nick at night," as some scholars have lovingly renamed him, comes to Jesus wanting to know how anyone can be born again. It is no coincidence he comes in the dark because that is where he stays, in the dark. In John, notations about light and dark indicate the status of one's relationship with Jesus. They also signify that character's recognition of and

relationship with Jesus. As John 1 alludes, Jesus is the light of the world, the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. If one is in the light, it means that person has the potential to see the true identity of Jesus as the light of the world. But, if a person is in the dark, they are unable or unwilling to enter into a relationship with Jesus or acknowledge his true identity. Caution should be applied here as the theme of light and darkness in John does not translate into how current society has perpetuated that white is good and black is bad. This slaps the Gospel of John with an incorrect assumption about such symbolism and is blatant racism. We understand better John's point of such symbolism if we go back to the imagery of light and darkness in the creation story of Genesis 1. With John starting his Gospel "In the beginning was the Word," he wants us to recall the first 3 words of Genesis, "In the beginning." Thus, John wants us to see that it is from God's creation of light in an otherwise dark world that John can say, "Jesus is the light of the world." His focus on light goes hand in hand with Genesis 1.

Light shines in the darkness, but light also exposes truths about ourselves or about things we have hidden. So like the woman at the well, in this season of Lent, we will meet Jesus at noon, when the light shines brightest on our journey, where we can reexamine our priorities, our commitments, our practices and attitudes. Our pilgrimage will invite us to choose the Light of the world over darkness, as well as to boldly open our eyes and see what God will reveal in those bright moments of life that will help us navigate through the darkness. May we all come to see what Nicodemus was unable to see, that God so loved *all the world* that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but have eternal life. Amen.