

Message #13

Kurt Hedlund

John

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PASSING THROUGH SAMARIA

JOHN 4:1-4

I.

The US Coast Guard has a reputation for making difficult rescues. Mike Barth, from our own congregation, was part of the Coast Guard for many years. Part of his service meant serving in the Persian Gulf during the first Iraq War, where his unit provided support and rescue services for the rest of our military in that theater of operations. My nephew also served in the Coast Guard. For a time he was stationed in Alaska where his Coast Guard cutter was responsible for policing operations as well as rescues. On one occasion he was tossed into the drink during a storm and was fortunate to be safely rescued.

Just this week Don Moberger was telling me about one of the inmates in the county jail who came to faith partly as the result of a Coast Guard rescue. He was on a fishing boat that was operating in the Bering Sea at the end of the Aleutian Islands when his boat sank. He was in a tiny raft in stormy seas. It looked like he was going to die, like most of the rest of his shipmates did. In desperation he called out to God for help, and suddenly a Coast Guard helicopter showed up and spotted him and rescued him.

In the face of these needs for rescue, the Coast Guard has to deal with storms, wind, rain, darkness, waves, long distances, human weakness and uncertain locations for people needing rescue. The Bible is also a story of difficult rescues. The Bible portrays us human beings as lost people with many weaknesses who encounter storms in life and need saving from a situation that will result in lostness for eternity. The good news is that God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to become a human being. He ultimately died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin so that by faith in Him we might have eternal life.

In the record of His earthly life we find examples of the loving character of Jesus which is intent upon providing rescues for lost people. In this pursuit of lost people who need rescue we find examples of the lengths to which He goes to provide rescue. Such is the case in the story before us this morning. We are going to see what lessons it has for us about the God-man who seeks us out and about the service we are likewise to be involved in providing for lost people around us.

In our study of the first three chapters of John's Gospel we have been introduced to the first of seven sign miracles that Jesus performed. We have also looked at three of the witnesses that the Apostle John describes who by their testimony argue the case that Jesus is the Son of God who is worthy of our trust. We have seen that in the first appearance of His public ministry Jesus was not well received by the religious establishment in Jerusalem. Last week we saw that He and His disciples went off to the Judean countryside, probably by the Jordan River, to engage in the kind of baptism ministry in which John the Baptist had been involved. Today we shall see what happens as Jesus heads back to his home territory in Galilee in the north of Judea.

II.

From vv. 1-4 of John #4, which is on p. 888 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST JESUS OVERCOMES A GEOGRAPHICAL OBSTACLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST...) In vv. 1-3 we read, **"Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee."**

Back in vv. 22 & 23 of #3 we find the geographical setting that provides the background for these verses. **"After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized..."**

(AENON) Aenon near Salim was probably a little south of the Sea of Galilee along the Jordan River. The suspicion of most Bible scholars is that Jesus and His disciples were somewhere in the same general vicinity, perhaps further south and closer to Jerusalem.

There are two additional bits of information that the first three verses of our passage provide us. (PROJECTOR OFF) The first is that Jesus knew that the Pharisees, a key part of the religious establishment, were getting reports about the growing crowds that were coming to see Jesus. These rabbis and religious legalists were already concerned about the popularity of John the Baptist. He called the Pharisees a brood of vipers. So he was on their blacklist.

Now Jesus was involved in the same kind of baptism ministry and was attracting even more people than John the Baptist. In addition to that, Jesus had already insulted the religious establishment by trying to kick money changers and animal sellers out of the temple. Then there were reports that Jesus had actually performed healing miracles. So the Pharisees perceived Him as a growing threat. It may well be that Jesus was not ready at this point to have a bigger confrontation with these religious leaders. This prompted him to move further north to Galilee.

The second bit of information that comes out of these first three verses is that Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were. We are not told the reason for this. Certainly it is always good for spiritual leaders to get their disciples involved in ministry. Beyond this, Jesus may have recognized the potential danger that would result from some people being baptized by Him. Can't you just imagine how these people would have been tempted later on to have pride because of it? "Well, I was baptized by Jesus Himself." Somehow that makes them better than anyone else.

In a similar way today, many Christian tourists are taken to a spot on the Jordan River just south of the Sea of Galilee, where baptisms are done. There is a certain encouragement to get baptized here. The temptation is to think that being baptized in this place somehow has a greater spiritual significance than being baptized anywhere else, like in one's home church.

Then in v. 4 we are told, "**And he had to pass through Samaria.**" (PROJECTOR ON--- SYCHAR MAP) It is very likely that Jesus and His disciples were baptizing somewhere along the Jordan River. On this map the Jordan River is the blue line stretching from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south. Capernaum, on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, was the base of operations that Jesus established for his ministry in Galilee. The shortest and easiest route from anywhere on the Jordan River to Galilee was to follow the Jordan River up to Galilee. That is a gentle, easy route that provides abundant water along the way for bathing, cleaning and drinking. To get to Sychar meant a climb of over 3000 feet, followed by a hike through hilly terrain to get to Galilee. In addition to that, as we will find out in a moment, the Samaritans and Jews did not have such a great relationship.

So why in the world does it say that Jesus had to pass through Samaria? Because Jesus had a divine appointment there. Jesus in His deity, and in His attention to the will of God, knew that there was an evangelistic opportunity there. To take advantage of that opportunity He had to overcome a geographical obstacle. I wonder if any of His disciples objected to the route that He took. I wonder if any of them pulled out a road map and pointed out that it would be faster to take Route 1 right up the Jordan River. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jay shared with us this morning the need and opportunity that we have in regard to the van ministry. We have these kids in Henderson and Las Vegas who want to come to church here. Some of them get picked up about 8 AM and don't get dropped off until 2 or 2:30 in the afternoon. How is that for commitment on their part?

There is a geographical obstacle involved for us in this outreach. It takes some money for gas and van maintenance and some time to collect and deliver these kids. Our insurance requires us to have two adults in the van when we do this. After church and Sunday school I would rather go home and have lunch and take a nap. But occasionally I go along with Jay on the return trip after Sunday school because he needs the help and I want to support this outreach and I want to set an example for everyone else.

As a church, how important do we believe it is to overcome a geographical obstacle to take advantage of an evangelistic opportunity?

III.

Let's look at vv. 5-8. In this section we find that TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST JESUS OVERCOMES A GENDER OBSTACLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST...) The Apostle John writes in v. 5, "**So he [Jesus] came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.**" (SYCHAR MAP) Galilee in the north and Samaria in the middle were both part of the Roman province of Judea at the time of our story. Sychar is the setting for the story that follows.

(SYCHAR MAP 3) Sychar was near the Old Testament city of Shechem. Jacob was the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. When he left the north to return to the land of his birth with his two primary wives and two secondary wives and his kids, his first stop was at Shechem. There his sons killed all the men of Shechem because the son of the ruler of the city had assaulted their sister Dinah. Jacob had bought a piece of land there. When the promised land of Canaan was divided up centuries later, one of the sons of Joseph was given this territory.

This division of the land came after the Hebrews escaped from Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for forty years and finally entered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. One of the things that the Hebrews brought with them was the bones of Joseph. It was Joseph who had saved his brothers from famine in Israel and initially protected them in Egypt. At the end of the Book of Joshua (JOSHUA 24:32) we have this note: "**As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money. It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.**"

There is a site near Shechem, which is also near modern day Nablus, which has been regarded for centuries as the burial place of Joseph. (JOSEPH'S TOMB) Twenty years ago it was given over to the care of the Palestinian Authority. In 2000 during the first Palestinian Intifada the place was ransacked and burned by Palestinians. It has since been restored by Israelis. The focus of interest in our story is on a well that is 300 yards away from Joseph's Tomb.

In v. 6 we read, "**Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.**" (JACOB'S WELL) It is generally recognized that this is the well of our story. There is also a good case that can be made that this is on the land that Jacob originally bought from the sons of Shechem in the incident described in the Book of Genesis in #33. There is no specific reference in the Old Testament to the digging of this well. It is now on the grounds of an Eastern Orthodox monastery. The well has been estimated to be about 135 feet deep. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So Jesus was tired when He arrived at this well. This is a reminder of the humanity of Jesus. The text says that it was about the sixth hour. This would be about noon. We have the beginning here of some interesting contrasts with the last personal, evangelistic contact that Jesus had, according to the Book of John. That contact involved Nicodemus, who came to him at night when it was dark. Now we have an incident that happens in the middle of the day in the bright sunlight.

The word for "well" in v. 6 also has significance. In the original Greek it is *pege*, which is used to describe a fresh water well or spring. This is not just a cistern that was used for collecting rainwater.

We come then to v. 7: "**A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'**" First century readers would immediately have recognized a problem here. Why would a woman come to a well to draw water in the middle of the day. Usually women came in groups to a well to draw water for the family. Normally they would do it at the beginning or the end of a day. So immediately there is a question raised about this woman's character.

There is also some indication that there were wells closer to Sychar. It could be that this well was regarded as having fresher water. It could be that people just liked to go to the well that had historical and religious significance to the people of Samaria. It could also mean that this woman was going farther from home in a greater effort to avoid contact with other people.

It is Jesus who initiates conversation with this woman. Jewish readers might remember significant encounters in the Old Testament where men initiated conversations with women at wells. The servant of Abraham met Rachel at a well when he was looking for a bride for Isaac. Moses also met his wife Zipporah in Midian at a well when he was fleeing from Egypt.

By the time of Jesus, however, most all of the cultures in the Middle East regarded it as inappropriate for a man to have a conversation in public with a woman who was not a wife or sister or daughter or mother. Standards in rural areas may have been a bit more lax. But Jesus was regarded as a Jewish rabbi. For a rabbi to engage in conversation with a strange woman was regarded by religious Jews as completely inappropriate.

The Talmud lists six activities that are inappropriate for a teacher and scholar. One of them was talking with strange women. One of the stricter rabbis of the first century said that to discover a wife engaging in public conversation with a stranger was grounds for divorce. But Jesus initiates the conversation and asks for help with a practical need.

Verse 8 adds this parenthetical note: "**(For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)**" We might first understand this to be an explanation for why Jesus had to ask for a drink from the woman, rather than the disciples. But I suspect that there is more to this statement than that. Given what we know about the social customs regarding a rabbi talking to a strange woman, the disciples of Jesus may have had great difficulty in handling such a conversation. It may have been difficult to have the conversation at all if His disciples were around.

The gender of this woman was another obstacle that could have prevented this conversation from ever happening. But Jesus was seeking her out. He took the initiative to begin an evangelistic discussion. J. C. Ryle, a godly Anglican bishop of the 1800s says, "**This is a gracious act of spiritual aggression on the sinner.**"

There are often potential dangers in getting too close to people of the opposite sex who are not relatives. But at the very least we can see from the example of Jesus that this should not keep us from telling others about the true God.

IV.

We come then to vv. 9-14 where we find that TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST JESUS OVERCOMES AN ETHNIC OBSTACLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. TO REACH THE SPIRITUALLY LOST...) In v. 9 we are told, "**The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?' (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)**"

Jesus is seeking out this woman. In order to reach her, he has overcome a geographical barrier and a gender barrier. He is also overcoming an ethnic barrier. By speech and/or dress the Samaritan woman recognizes that Jesus is Jewish. This difference is another potential problem.

In 722 BC God sent the Assyrians from the north to overrun the northern kingdom of Israel. The Jews in this part of the divided kingdom had turned to worship of false Gods. They turned away from God's law and they rejected the testimony of the prophets whom God sent to them. (2 KINGS 17:6) In 2 Kings #17 v. 6 we read, "**In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria [another name for the northern kingdom of Israel], and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.**" Some of the Israelites in the northern kingdom were killed. Some were left behind. Many of the more talented and wealthy Israelites were taken away into exile.

In 2 Kings #17 v. 24 (2 KINGS 17:24) we have this additional information: "**And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities**

of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities." Some Israelites remained, especially in the rural areas. In the decades and centuries that followed there was intermarriage between the Jews and the Gentiles. A mixed race people was the result. (PROJECTOR OFF)

When the Jews from the southern kingdom of Judah returned from exile in Babylon a couple of centuries later, some of them settled in the north in Galilee. Most of them returned to the south to Jerusalem and surrounding area. The leaders of Samaria at that time opposed the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem. Some years later they built their own temple on Mt. Gerezim near Shechem.

When the Greeks gained control of the region in the 300s BC, the Samaritans cooperated with them. The Jews were more resistant. When the Greek-Syrian king Antiochus Ephiphanes IV outlawed the practice of Judaism in the middle of the 100s BC, the Samaritans did not resist. The Jews did. They were persecuted for their faith. The Samaritans were not.

The Jews eventually rebelled against the Greek Syrians and won. A few years later their leader, John Hyrcanus, burned the temple on Mt. Gerezim. Twenty years after that, he came north and sacked Shechem and the main city of the region, also named Samaria. There were various incidents that followed. On one occasion Samaritans snuck into the temple in Jerusalem and scattered pig bones around.

A Jewish document of the general time describes the attitude of most Jews toward the Samaritans (SIRACH 50:25): "**[There are] two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people.** (SIRACH 50:26) **Those who live in Seir [Edomites], and the Philistines, and the foolish people that live in Shechem [Samaritans]."**

In v. 9 in our text the woman points out the obvious to Jesus: "I am a woman of Samaria." In the Mishnah there is this statement: "**The daughters of Samaria are menstruants from their cradle.**" (Mishnah Niddah 4:1) In other words, any contact with a Samaritan woman renders a Jew ceremonially unclean.

At the end of v. 9 we have this parenthetical aside by the Apostle John: "**For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.**" The literal meaning of the Greek is "Jews do not eat dishes with Samaritans." Another rabbi of the time (SHEBI QUOTATION) wrote, "**He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine.**" (Shebi 8:10) So this was like the worst of the racial divide in the Deep South in the 40's and 50's and 60's.

Later on, in #8 of this Gospel, we will find that Jewish leaders will reach for the worst name that they can come up with in order to attack Jesus. (JOHN 8:48) In v. 48 we read, "**The Jews answered him [Jesus], 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?'**" So this was the world's perspective on the situation facing Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Religious Jews regarded the woman as being defiling to a Jew, and especially a rabbi. But for Jesus, the situation was just the reverse. For Jesus makes clean what the world regards as defiling. He continues His pursuit of this Samaritan woman. He engages in clever conversation that provokes her curiosity. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 10: "**Jesus 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.'**" Jesus' words invite more questions. What is the gift of God? What is living water? Who are you? "Living water" in Jewish culture, perhaps also for the Samaritans, referred to fresh water from springs or rivers. But this Jew seems to be talking about more than that.

The Samaritan woman takes the bait. Verse 11: "**The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?'**" She chooses to take Jesus on a literal level. This is similar to the response that Jesus got from Nicodemus when he spoke of being born again.

She continues in v. 12, "**Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.**" There is not a record in the Bible that Jacob dug this well. There was apparently a long tradition that he had done it. It is possible that this was the case. Jesus doesn't make an issue of it.

The primary issue is the identity of this Jewish guy making these provoking statements. The Samaritans identified with Jacob as their ancestor. Does this guy think he is greater than Jacob? In Genesis #32 the story is told that Jacob was returning from the north to meet his brother Esau who had promised to kill him years earlier. The night before this meeting Jacob had a wrestling match with an angel of the Lord. It was likely that this angel of the Lord was the preincarnate Christ. He was the Son of God before He became a human being. Now He was standing before this Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob.

According to vv. 13 & 14, "**Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'** The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.'" Jesus uses a present tense verb when He speaks of drinking the physical water of the well. But he uses what is called an aorist tense to suggest that a specific act of drinking this living water will quench a spiritual thirst

forever. In a similar way Jesus taught Nicodemus that being born again would provide a certain entrance to the kingdom of God.

This terminology of water and life and the kingdom of God has a rich Old Testament background. (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAIAH 12:3) The prophet Isaiah spoke of a coming kingdom and declared, "**With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.**" In #55 v. 1 of his book (ISAIAH 55:1), he wrote, "**Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.**" Notice that everyone is invited, not just Jews. There is also no charge. The price has already been paid.

Consider the prophet Jeremiah who speaks to God about his own people. (JEREMIAH 17:13) In #17 v. 13 he says, "**O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water.**" It is the Lord who is the fountain of living water. Jesus is experiencing the same kind of rejection from His own people that YHWH experienced during much of Israel's Old Testament history. He is going to experience a much better reception from these Samaritans, these rejects from Judaism. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The water that Jesus is describing seems to represent eternal life. This abundant and meaningful eternal life is provided by the Holy Spirit as a result of the work of this Jesus, God in the flesh. He offers this eternal life to all who will believe in Him. It is offered to all segments of society.

It was offered to Nicodemus. He was a wealthy, educated, moral, religious leader of society. It is offered in our story to probably an illiterate woman of questionable character who was rejected by her own society.

The lesson for us Christians is to follow the example of Jesus. He overcame geographical, gender and ethnic obstacles to bring the gospel to needy people. Such is the work of our missions committee. That is why we spend a significant percentage of our church budget in supporting the work of the gospel around the world.

The lesson applies to us on a more personal level as well. We don't have the same divine knowledge that Jesus did about who is ready and willing to accept the gospel. Our responsibility is to be available and on the lookout for opportunities to tell people about Jesus. Sometimes that may involve people who are a lot different from us. Sometimes it may involve people from the top echelons of society. Sometimes it may involve the rejects of society. Sometimes it will involve the family next door.

Herbert Beerens was a Canadian Christian who was sent to Africa to reach a tribe of people called the Yao. There are about two million of them. Most of them have identified with Islam. There were many obstacles that Herbert had to overcome in order to bring the gospel to these people. This is his story: **"We were the first missionaries to enter the tribe in 45 years. We settled in Chowe village, home for 3,000 to 4,000 people. Twenty-one years before we came, a Yao Muslim man from Malawi had had a dream. In that dream he met Jesus Christ, who told him to go and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Yao. He came to Chowe village and the chief asked his name and why he had come there. He said his name was Mr. Herbert, which is not a Malawian name, and that he had come on direct orders of Jesus Christ to tell them about him. He was killed after four people trusted Christ. When we came to that same village 21 years later and spoke to the same chief, he asked me my name and why I had come. I said my name is Herbert and I had come to preach the name of Jesus Christ. It was only afterwards, when many of the villagers had become Christians, that I was told that story by the chief."** (*Pulse*, 7/27/1990) And so the gospel began to make significant inroads among the Yao people.

We may not be called to Africa. But perhaps there are people within our reach, people who may be significantly different from us, who are ready to hear the gospel. Perhaps we need to be willing to overcome obstacles to tell them about Jesus.