

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
March 12, 2023
John 4: 5-42

Our Lenten theme has been “encountering Christ.” We are following John’s gospel with some of the stories John includes, characters of different walks who encounter Christ, whose journeys come into contact and are changed and transformed by Christ. By an encounter, I mean more than knowing of, or knowing about, or being an acquaintance, but an encounter is a personal engagement. They engage Jesus, themselves. They grapple, try to figure out who Jesus is, and figure out their own relationship to him.

Merriam-Webster, among their potential meanings defines the verb encounter as “to come upon face-to-face”, or “to come upon or experience somebody or something, especially unexpectedly.” This is what we are getting at. To come into a face-to-face experience that causes us to know and be known in some deeper way.

In the midst of John’s theology and narrative about the cross, we get these glimpses of people encountering Jesus unexpectedly in various circumstances, encountering Jesus face to face, learning of him in the moment in such a way that changes their lives and trajectories. And isn’t such an encounter at the heart of our Christian story, our Christian narrative, our testimonies and our witness?

The goal of the Christian journey is not just to know about God, or know about Jesus, or to be familiar with who he is, or to be familiar with some of his teachings, or to have his benefits without having a real personal connection. The goal of our faith is to know and be known, to encounter Jesus in the midst of the circumstances of our lives in such a way that it changes our lives and trajectories. To be forgiven and redeemed and called to discipleship by name.

It is the ideal. On a Sunday when we baptize a young person, we are cognizant of that ideal, of wanting young people to grow up with a personal faith, with their own encounter. And we may forget that what we want for our kids is also what we need for ourselves, a personal faith, a personal encounter. But maintaining that sense of encounter with Christ can be difficult. There is many an obstacle that gets in the way. Perhaps it is doubt, or our rational-critical-minds telling us it is silly, or maybe a history of disappointments, or a feeling that we are not worthy.

For this Samaritan woman, there is a litany of things that cloud the possibility of encountering Christ, that inhibit or get in the way of such an encounter, many reasons that cause her to pull back, pull away, limit the relationship, limit what might happen unexpectedly. She brings each issue up as the story progresses. He is a Jew. She is a Samaritan. His people worship at Jerusalem, hers at Mt. Gerazim. He is a man. She is a woman. He seems to live in the open, she must try to keep things hidden. He has no bucket and doesn't belong there, she does. When he reveals that he knows her secrets and stories and vulnerabilities, she keeps steering the conversation back to topics of theology and history, and their differences.

It is like trying to work on a relationship or build a friendship when things are not fresh anymore, when there is history. There are things at play that we can't name cleanly, that we don't know how to get around. This may be past hurt or resentment, or tension, or frustration. You try to improve the relationship but it seems stuck, because there are dynamics at play that we can see, that keep complicating and sabotaging our attempts.

Jesus is bolder than I would advise. He keeps going directly towards one of those aspects at play. He wants to talk about the men in her life. It is Jesus' mention of her husband that seems to get a little spike on the heart monitor of this story. A heightening of tension, touching on something of consequence. She seeks to steer the story away from it. But there is something to it. She has had a sequence of men, and the man she is currently with is not her husband. Now to our western perceptions, she may sound like a "loose" woman, who is sleeping around, or can't stay in a relationship, or perpetually committing adultery. And whatever faults or tendencies she had demonstrated, meaning she doesn't have to be perfect for us to have compassion or empathy with her, there are significant cultural dynamics going on here also.

Marriage was something that occurred for girls in their adolescent years. They went through the flowering festival and suitors who took a liking negotiating with the family. There were elaborate celebrations involving the whole community. This was the marriage tradition, how things went when all goes as it should. But what happens when it doesn't go as it should? For example, what happens to one who doesn't get pursued, who doesn't have a suitor offering a bride-price, who doesn't get married at the right moment and the moment passes, or who gets married and is dismissed by her husband? What happens then?

If one finds herself in this undesirable situation, in order for her to have security and to have provisions and a house-hold, she must find a way to attach herself to a household, likely as a secondary or tertiary wife. But such a wife is expendable,

easily dismissed, and each time one is dismissed, it contributes to the stigma, contributes to her undesirable reputation and status, contributes to the pattern of her being used rather than being cared for.

This woman's journey has not been easy. It has involved a great deal of insecurity, a great deal of rejection, a great deal of scrutiny and scorn. It is no surprise that she has learned to steer things away from her personal story.

One of the questions often asked of this passage is why she is at the well in the middle of the day. A variety of explanations have been offered, one being that by being there at the middle of the day she would not have to deal with others, as most would come to the well in the cool of the day. However, a more likely explanation that my Hebrew professor suggested is that the well in the middle of the day is where singles who could not find a mate in the traditional ways met each other. She can't become an adolescent teenager again. So, this is where she goes to find someone. Which would suggest that she is again in a place of insecurity and vulnerability and of being passed over and rejected.

Sometimes there are constraints that limit life's possibilities. Not only is she dealing with this constant strain, the constraints of life have a way of getting internalized, of traumatizing, of making one defensive and wary and to lose the hope that things might be better.

I think of William Waring Cuney's poem that we read this morning who catches both aspects, the external constraints and the way they become internalized and complicated. He gives us the portrait of a woman who has beauty and worth and possibility, but she can't see it, doesn't believe it nor know how to act on it. If she were in more ideal circumstances, he suggests, that she might come to know the beauty and worth that she bears, "but there are no palm trees on the street, and dish water gives back no images."

The Samaritan woman has developed a litany of defenses, her constantly trying to get ahead of the problem, looking for the next man who might provide stability. Her being able to converse and debate and hold at a distance. Her ability to constantly steer the conversation back to their differences. She is looking for security and help and maybe even love, but an encounter that surprises and that intrudes upon her vulnerability is not what she was looking for.

He wants to offer her water that satisfies, that won't leave her always thirsting and vulnerable and uncertain of relationships and future. But how do you trust it? He wants her to take in such water, the way she would drink from the well. But she

seems concerned, the way Hudson with his allergies acts concerned when offered some new food, wondering if it is safe to put inside his body.

What caused the shift, I wonder, the change when she left her water jar and went proclaiming to her community that Jesus knew things about her. What caused her to return to her scrutinizers, to those who blamed her for what men had frequently done to her, and proclaim: come see a man who told me everything I had ever done.

Surely Jesus was not unique in that way. He wasn't the first to expose her. But in their encounter, they do achieve a face-to-face engagement, to let the unexpected moment lead to a new understanding, to a possibility of knowing and being known. And this encounter changes the trajectory of her journey, because she is part of Jesus' story now, this Samaritan woman. And Jesus is a part of hers, as she goes forward with her head held higher, with her soul nurtured with living water.

My question this morning is, in this season of Lent, what it is for you? What are the dynamics at play, the obstacles or issues that keeps Jesus at a distance? Do we, like the woman of our story, manage to keep at a safe distance? What are the barriers, the dynamics at play that are hard to name, but always seem to complicate the encounter? And what would it take to transcend or move through such obstacles, to have that face-to-face engagement that might deepen our understanding of both Jesus and ourselves. To once again get to a place where you might say something like, "come see a man who told me everything I ever did." To get to a place where Jesus is trustworthy, where we can acknowledge and submit to the fact that he knows it all, and still loves us. To get to the place where despite whatever constraints that have been at play, we might come to see ourselves through Christ's eyes, might come to draw near and be nourished and renewed.

And all God's people said...

John 4

⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A 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.) ⁹ The 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.) 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." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but 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." ¹⁵ The 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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But 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. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do

you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to 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.”

Jesus Returns to Galilee

⁴³ When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee ⁴⁴ (for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in the prophet’s own country).

⁴⁵ When he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival; for they too had gone to the festival.