

**He had to go Through Samaria**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**John 4:1-15**  
**3-19-2017**

A long time ago, this place mattered. And not just to the locals, but to everybody. It doesn't look like much now. The well is serviceable. It's deep, but certainly not fancy. And this place, well, it's hot, hotter than Fayetteville in August. The sun beats down on dusty streets, its yellow rays never seem to let up. To the uninformed, and the unenlightened, this place, the locals call it Sychar, others have called it Shechem, well it's just another map dot – they don't even have a 7-11 or a McDonalds or a stop-light. When you schedule your trip from Jerusalem to the Galilee, don't bother passing through here – there's nothing worth seeing and nobody worth talking to.

Lucky for us, Jesus is neither uninformed, nor unenlightened. Jesus has read his scriptures. Jesus appreciates the little things. And Jesus has a different kind of GPS – Jesus is not bound to anybody's social conventions. "Siri," he says, "Give me directions to Samaria." And he's on his way.

Siri leads Jesus to Jacob's well, the centerpiece of this town called Sychar. Jesus looks into the distance, and using his hands, he frames a shot – Mt. Gerizim is in the background.

"Yes, I can see it," he says. "This is the place of my ancestors. It was here that God promised the land of Israel to Abram. It was here at this well that Isaac's servant met Rebekah, and where Jacob met Laban's daughter Rachel. Legend has it that Jacob dug this well 75-feet deep with his own hands, and that he gave this land to Joseph and all his descendants. And it was here, hundreds of years later, that Joshua led the people of Israel into the Promised-Land, and Joshua, standing on that mountain proclaimed to the Israelites, "Choose this day whom you will serve...As for me and my house, we shall serve the Lord!"

"Yeah, this is the place," Jesus says, "This, is Samaria, and my ministry, it's got to go through here."

But Jesus' disciples don't understand his logic. More recent trauma blinds their ability to see the special qualities of this place.

Samaria is the Northern Kingdom – A bunch of Yankees!

Like the children of Cain, and Hagar, and Rueben, the children of Samaria have been cast out of the circle of God's chosen – they are the discards from the pruning of Israel's family tree.

Nearly 800 years ago, they were weak. They did not trust YHWH, and so they made allegiances with the Assyrians, who eventually conquered their 10 tribes. The Assyrians filled their land with new people, new Gods, and new customs. And these ten tribes, well they eventually married women who were not Jewish and they worshiped Gods who were not YHWH. They were no longer pure, they were no longer chosen. Nope, all they were now were a bunch of half-breeds.

And when their Southern brothers and sisters, the real Jewish folks, when they were deported to Babylon in the 500s, the Samaritans remained in Shechem. They even had the audacity to claim that proper temple worship occurred at the shrine of Mt. Gerizim, not the Jerusalem Temple. Yessir, these Samaritans are a sorry lot indeed – amoral and blasphemous to boot. No good Jewish person would ever be seen associating with this kind.

But Jesus is a healer. And Jesus is inclusive. By coming to Samaria, Jesus makes clear that his ministry will be available to the whole world, even the discarded, especially the discarded. God's love does not have geographic boundaries.

And what better place to start, then right here, at Jacob's well?

Seeing a nice flat rock to lie on, Jesus grabs a warm slab, and rests for a moment. Siri got him to Samaria, but it wasn't the most direct route, and he's exhausted from the noon-day heat.

He sends his disciples into town to scurry up some food.

And just as Jesus is beginning to relax, he notices something interesting. He sees a Samaritan woman coming to draw water from Jacob's well.

Why should Jesus notice this woman? It's a well? People need water. And it's hot.

Nothing out of the ordinary here, right?

Fredrick Buechner hypothesizes that this woman possessed a wry smile and slender ankles. And Jesus, Buechner says, "has a soft spot for ladies with wry smiles and slender ankles." But I think it's something more than that. Jesus is perceptive and opportunistic.

This woman is out of place. Women came to gather water in the morning and evening, when the sun was coming up or going down, and temperatures were cool, but not at noon – it's really hard to lug water in harsh heat. And furthermore, the well was a place to socialize – Much like the office water cooler of today, women came to the well to visit friends and to catch up on the latest events of the village. The well was a social outlet. This woman comes to draw water at noon to avoid persecution from others in her community – she is the discard of a discarded race. Jesus senses her alienation.

Next, Jesus does the unthinkable. He engages this woman in conversation. This is scandalous! It's scandalous because Jewish men did not talk to woman in public – this was an abomination. And they certainly wouldn't ask them for a drink of water, or share a ladle and a bucket.

Jesus' approach may be unconventional, but it is highly effective. Jesus uses the icebreaker of his thirst to create an opportunity to engage the Samaritan woman in his ministry. And she is receptive.

She engages Jesus in the first theological conversation of John's gospel, and also the longest. And the woman takes a journey. With each statement Jesus makes, the woman comes to the realization that Jesus is more and more significant. At first, she sees Jesus as a scandalous Jew who asks a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. Next, Jesus is a conversation partner worth engaging. This woman is smart, and also curious. The woman asks Jesus how he can give her living water – the well is deep and he has no bucket!!! You cannot collect water with your arms, and if you could, well that would be a pretty neat party trick. Does this man think he's greater than Jacob, the ancestor who provided the well of literal "living water?"

Jesus tells her he can give her the kind of water that far surpasses Jacob's – he can give her living water that provides eternal life. The woman realizes that Jesus is not just an interesting conversation partner, but someone who can give her a gift of great value. "Give me this water!" she says.

And here we come to the focal point, not only of today's lection, but of the whole of John's gospel. The Word, that wisdom quality of God, was made flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and we have seen his glory. And those who choose to be witnesses of this truth, they will be children of a God who gives them infinite grace and love.

A nameless woman, in a forgotten part of Palestine, opens herself to the possibility that God has come and dwelled among us. She opens herself to the witness of the truth that Jesus offers.

Compare this to last week's lection – Nicodemus, a named and prominent Pharisee comes to Jesus in the cover of darkness, and yet he fails to grasp the truth that Jesus offers.

In the verses that follow our lection, the Samaritan Woman will continue her conversation with Jesus. Jesus will show her that he knows her, that she's been married five times, and is now in a less formal relationship, but no matter – Jesus has not come to condemn her, and besides she's done nothing that begs condemning. He knows she matters. He knows she is open to the possibilities that God can offer. He'll remind her that the worship of God is not spatial – God is not bound by time or place, but rather, God is to be worshiped in spirit and in truth. And to this nameless woman, Jesus, says, "I am He, the Messiah, the One whom you are waiting for."

And all at once, this nameless woman, she matters again. She abandons her water jar, and runs into the village, telling everyone of what's she's seen and heard, "A man who's told me everything I've ever done! Could he? No. Is it possible? Could this man be Messiah?"

This nameless woman, once afraid to be seen at the well, dares to ask this question in public. And because of this woman's witness, we're told that many more people in Samaria come to meet Jesus for themselves and believe in his truth. In fact, Jesus stays in this village for two more days, all on account of this woman's testimony.

Throughout John's gospel, Jesus plays a game of "pass it on." He invites himself into conversations with all walks of life – he talks to nameless women, recognized Pharisees, Roman soldiers, even Pontius Pilate himself – He sees every meeting space, be it dusty village or crowded ghetto or lush palace, as fertile ground for harvesting truth. And those who meet Jesus with eagerness, they spread the witness of his presence to others. And those who hear this witness and take it to heart, they come and meet Jesus for themselves.

The beauty of John's Gospel is that communion with God is not bound to social status. And communion with God is not bound only to the characters we read about. In God's community, Jew and Samaritan, Woman and Man, Rich and Poor, Gay and Straight, Hatfield and McCoy, Duke and Carolina fan – ALL (ALL, ALL OF THEM, AND ALL OF US!!!!) – We have the potential to be children of God – we need only to be open to the witness of truth. And when we understand this truth, we no longer need to take cover in darkness or noon-day-light, but rather, we may join in the holy conversation of the well.

At Jacob's well, a nameless Samaritan Woman was told she mattered. (And so were we!!!). And this nameless woman rejoined the fold. (And so can we!!!).

Today's lection begs a questions that each of us must ask:

How many more Samaritan Women are still searching for living water at Jacob's well? When we leave here this morning, we will encounter plenty more Samaritan Villages – places cursed with the wrong zip code. And we will encounter plenty more nameless souls – people cursed with social stigmas – perhaps they are haunted by the consequences of poor choices, or the burdens of systematic marginalization. And like this nameless woman, they seek living water in the cover of darkness. They need to find someone who can look past their broken present, and see into a future full of possibilities, a future buoyed by God's grace and peace and hope, a future where they are reconciled and labeled rightly, Children of God.

So here's the real question Sardis Baptist Church: When we leave here today, which route will we ask Siri to choose? Will we ask for a detour? Or will we stop in Samaria with ladle and bucket and the promise of living water?

Friends, Jesus had to go through Samaria. So do we. Amen.