

“Go and tell!”

March 27, 2011

Text: Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-26

I.

Jesus' encounter with the *woman at the well* in John's gospel is—on the surface—a most improbable meeting. To begin with, she's a Samaritan. Jews (like Jesus) weren't supposed to have anything to do with Samaritans. Samaritans were outcasts, outsiders.

In everything, it would seem that this woman was *lesser* than Jesus—

- lesser in religion, in ethnicity, in gender (women were relatively powerless in 1st century Palestine).
- She was uneducated, with a shameful past; Jesus was a rabbi, a moral leader of the community.
- On the surface, they would seem to have nothing in common.

Yet, here they are ... at Jacob's well ... it's about noon, with the midday heat building up ... and Jesus, tired and thirsty from his journey, asks her for a drink from the well.

Her immediate reaction is stunned disbelief ... that he, a Jew, would be talking to her. But then, as the conversation unfolds, she gets drawn into the aura and the web of Jesus' person. (The exchange moves along at a fast pace)

1. In no time, the conversation moves from the literal to the metaphorical and symbolic ... and they're talking about *living water* ... and about how *everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty*.
2. and soon they're talking about *the spirit* and deep matters of faith ...

And Jesus tells her to *go and tell* her husband and to come back. In her experience of Jesus, Jesus seems to know all about her present and past lives. She's amazed.

- And, right away, she determines that Jesus is a prophet ...
- and soon there's talk of salvation and the coming of the Messiah ... to which Jesus says, *I am he*.

And she believes ... returns to her village and to her people ... and many in her family and town come to believe.

In this brief time period, this woman's life it totally changed. CHECK IT OUT: Out of this intense conversation, she rises from thinking of herself as a *nobody* with the door to the future always closing ... to a *somebody* whose future is, now, wide open. To her mind, imagine the progression of this transformation.

1. No longer is she shunned, on the outside looking in.
2. No longer is she a *nobody* wondering and lamenting, day after day: *How long, Lord, how long?*

She's met Jesus ... she believes ... it's a new day. This sort of encounter and experience is what John's gospel is all about.

II.

One of the commencement traditions and Harvard University is Senior Class Chapel. On the morning of graduation, seniors gather at Memorial Church to hear the minister offer words of solace and encouragement as they prepare to graduate to take their places in the world.

The 1998 senior class heard the *no holds barred* truth from Rev. Peter Gomes, the highly revered minister at Harvard and the author of several books on the Bible. In his compelling preaching style, Dr. Gomes took no prisoners as he began:

You are going to be sent out of here for good, and most of you aren't ready to go. The president is about to send you off into the fellowship of educated men and women but the problem is ...and he paused here for emphasis ... you know ...just ...how ...dumb ...you are.

And worse than that, Peter Gomes continued, the world—your parents in particular—are going to expect that you will be among the brightest and best. But you know that you can no longer fool all the people even some of the time. By noontime today, you will be out of here. By tomorrow you will be history. By Saturday, you will be toast. That's a fact—no exceptions, no extensions.

*Nevertheless, however, there is reason to hope. For **the future**—your future—is **God's gift to you**. God will not let you stumble or fall. God has not brought you this far to this place to abandon you or leave you here alone and afraid. The God of our faith never stumbles, never sleeps, never goes on sabbatical. Thus, my beloved and bewildered young friends, do not be afraid.*

In his message to the senior class at Harvard, Peter Gomes did for these students what Jesus does for the *woman at the well*. He levels with them—reassuring them, assuaging their fears and nurturing them into the future.

III,

In God's scheme of things, there are no losers, no *nobodies*.

- There are the poor, the sick, and the afflicted.
- There are the fearful, the anxious and the overwhelmed.
- There are the estranged, the disappointed and the despaired.
- But with God, everybody is a somebody.

With the woman at the well, returning to her family and town—for the first time—ever—she feels understood. Imagine that! Someone understands you.

Don't we often have a sense of ourselves that no one seems to grasp? It's not always easy to tell people who we are. Sometimes we don't totally know ourselves. To be understood! Wow!

And what's more, she feels accepted ... forgiven ... welcome to return.

- No more being left out ...
- no more murmuring your way through life, convinced you're a nobody ... wondering if anything will ever change.
- Wondering, sadly, *is this all there is?*

The sin unveiled in John 4 is not the sin of a lax morality; it's not about behaviors. The sin is the sin of unbelief. Indeed, the driving obsession of John's gospel is that people believe.

And for John, this *belief* means everything.

1. It means that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a man of considerable stature ... but a man with an nagging emptiness from within; a man who has been searching, no doubt, for years; it means his future is wide open. He's not forever tied to his past. He can be born afresh, in water and in spirit.
2. For the man born blind, in John 9, who receives his sight, it means—after years of darkness ... of having no sense of the beauty of the outside world, no life in the present and no hope for the future—in means light has come into his life. From a lifetime of begging on the margins of community, he moves to a life of new sight, new light and new possibilities.
3. And for the *woman at the well*, whose whole life pattern had been one of *never quite making the grade* ... always, somehow, falling short; it means her future is, now—after meeting Jesus—flung wide open. Her new life in Christ transcends any barriers that might otherwise divide, separate and marginalize.

IV.

One of the common themes on John's gospel is *come and see*: *Come and see* this Jesus and believe. But another common theme is: ***Go and tell!*** *Go and tell* your family friends what you've seen and experienced.

In other words, don't just keep the good news of your life to yourself. Share it. ***Go and tell!***

Go and tell! is a message of optimism and hope.

A Mercedes-Benz TV commercial shows one of their cars colliding with a concrete wall during a safety test. Someone then asks a Mercedes engineer why their company doesn't enforce their patent on their car's energy-absorbing car body. The Mercedes' design has been copied by almost every other car maker in the world in spite of the fact that they have an exclusive patent.

To this question, the engineer replies in a somewhat clipped German accent: ***Because in life, some things are just too important NOT to share.***

Wow! What a statement! ***Some things are just too important NOT to share.*** That's the way the author of John's gospel feels about Jesus. Believing in him is just TOO important NOT to share with people.

Go and tell! Go and share the passion in your heart! Go and tell the hope in your spirit!

And the *woman at the well* goes back to her city—so excited and inspired, that she leaves her water-jar back at Jacob's well. Arriving home, she says to the people: ***Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!***

And then, as the reality of her experience of Jesus settles in, she adds: ***He can't be the Messiah, can he?***

Go and tell!

V.

No matter how each of us works out our faith. No matter how we come to God and understand ourselves as Christians.

- It's important to be passionate about what we believe in life.
- It's important to be passionate about our faith, but also about our *thirst* for faith.

Like Nicodemus and like the woman at the well, we must never give up the thirst. Faith comes to us in different ways, in varying waves and undulations. Ours is not simply a straight-lined, linear faith, coming to us in the usual predictable ways. As Jesus says to the searching **Nicodemus**—CHECK IT OUT:

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. But the larger point is: faith comes. But it comes to us in its own time ...

- with its own poetry and music ...
- with its own nuance and grit.
- The depths of faith are always more than our ability to explain them.

God's presence and God's absence are but different sides of the same thirst. The key is that we are *thirsty* to begin with. Thirsty for more of God, for more of the Spirit, for more of God's *holy truth* ... for more of God's grace, forgiveness and love.

Go and tell! Tell of God's presence, but also of God's absence. To know both, to whatever extent, is to know the human experience.

VI.

Few have known the thirst of God's absence, for example, more profoundly than **Mother Teresa**. A few years back, TIME Magazine had a cover story on her where, in her private writings, it was revealed how she experienced long periods of an agonizing sense of abandonment. To some extent, the *woman at the well* might well understand.

Even in such prolonged darkness, however, Mother Teresa's tenacious, fractured spirit clung to the belief that her labor of love on behalf of Calcutta's hopeless ones satiated the thirst of Jesus on the cross.

Wow! Again, as always, it's all about the depths and the reaches of our love.

Go and tell! Because when we do ... and when it comes from the heart and from the depths of our human struggle, we can rejoice with the **Psalmist**:

*O come, let us worship and bow down,
Let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

