



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

I Am He

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 19th, 2017

The Third Sunday in Lent

Based on Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42

*Come Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us;
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.*

Christianity is a story; a great winding, lumbering mess of a story. It goes up and down, hither and yon. It's a holy narrative, carved out of thousands of years of lived history.

It's not just a story, it's *our* story and, while for Christians it may be *THE* story, we believe there are *other* compelling stories which make their own meandering way towards the Divine.

But out of the grand narrative of Christianity, there are the smaller stories: stories filled with humor, irony, hubris, and sacrifice. They are smaller stories captured throughout the Bible which are painfully human and yet the holy shines through them from the inside out.

The story of the Samaritan woman we've just heard read is one of these stories.

I've just returned from a House of Bishops meeting at Camp Kanuga near Ashville, North Carolina. Even there it snowed, but the cold didn't chill the affections of friends and colleagues who, over a number of years, have forged relationships during one of the most antagonistic and polarizing periods known to our genteel branch of the Anglican Communion.

We bishops participated in a three-day Diversity Training program (which most of us had already done, but we understood it to be an important example to the wider Church that we valued the training so highly we were willing to do it again).

But for me, the most important business of the House is not found in training programs, or on the legislative floor, or in the work of task forces or committees.

For me, the most important business of the House of Bishops happens at mealtimes and in the evenings when groups of bishops gather around and tell their stories.

That is when the Spirit becomes flesh and dwells among us.

We tell stories of Pyrrhic victories, heartbreaking losses, and humiliating defeats.

We tell stories of minor triumphs which were hard-won and stories which reveal the mysterious ways the love of God keeps making itself known.

The stories are compelling because they're so raw and honest and true and because they're shared in a place of trust, where the difficulties inherent to the Office of the Bishop are fully known and appreciated.

When we share our stories, we come to know one another in a deeper way, and we build the crucial emotional capital necessary to deal with our very significant theo-political differences.

A friend of mine, a bishop from a Southern state, is known to tell some of the very best stories. Most of the stories he tells have been told over and over, in his slow drawl, for as long as I've been a member of the House.

He looks at us with genuine amazement when bishops, old and new, beg him to tell the story of "The Priest and the Vestry" (by the way, not the real title!), a story most of us know well enough that we could probably tell it ourselves!

But it wouldn't be the same because, while it *is* a shared story, it is best told in his voice and, when he begins to speak, the familiar beginning has us all laughing in anticipation of what we know is to come, long before he ever arrives at the punchline.

I have thought a lot about the power of story in the Christian faith.

I think we can lose our buildings.

I think we can lose our standing in the culture.

I think we can lose our leadership and have significant losses in membership and we can even lose our way for years at a time. But what we cannot lose, what we must never lose, is our stories. They are at the very center of who we are.

The story of the Samaritan woman is the longest narrative story in the Bible. It is found only in John's gospel (and I know more than a few of you wondered if the reader of today's Gospel just didn't know where the end of the lesson was located!).

This story is resplendent with detail. For example, the author mentions it was noon, the hottest time of the day (and perhaps the only time a Samaritan woman who had previous marriages was welcome to use the community well; a time when all of the other women were staying indoors and away from the heat of the day).

It is the only place in the New Testament I can think of where Jesus is described as being "tired."

How human can our God be?

He was so tired. Have you ever been just bone tired?

- He was tired of the walking. They had come all the way from Judea on the way to Galilee.
- He was tired of the talking and the teaching and the preaching.
- He was tired of the crowds and exhausted by their omnipresent neediness.

He was giving it everything he had...but he was so tired.

He had chosen to go through Samaria to Galilee while most Jews would have preferred to go around Samaria and stay away from their traditional enemies, But he had other reasons for taking this route.

The crowds had begun to grow around him after John the Baptist declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God," and singled Jesus out as the Messiah. The Pharisees never had any love for John the Baptist, but as Jesus became more and more popular, they were coming to absolutely despise him.

So, Jesus sat down to rest, and to have a drink of water after a long hot day, and maybe to have something to eat. And he's just sitting there, next to the well... and along comes a woman.

Now Samaritans and Jews don't really have anything polite to say to one another and this exchange begins tersely.

Plus, he's a man and she's a woman and in this culture, women and men who are not family don't normally speak with one another.

But Jesus doesn't worry about ancient animosities or societal custom and, apparently, without a ladle or a water jug he asks her, "Give me something to drink."

And she, mocking him, wonders how a Jew would ask a drink of her, a woman of Samaria.

And Jesus says, "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."

You can almost see her eyes roll!

"Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" In other words, "You, who have no bucket... you're going to show me the secret to eternal life???"

She goes on, "I don't think you're greater than the prophet Jacob who gave us this well and, with his sons and his flocks, drank from it."

And Jesus responds, "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."

Jesus keeps revealing himself a little bit more and a little bit more....

"Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty, or have to keep coming here to draw water." We don't know for sure, but I have to believe this was said with the most sarcastic voice possible.

And now, Jesus escalates the exchange. "Go call you husband and come back."

She tells him she has no husband and Jesus says, "You are right in saying you have no husband for you have five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband."

Now that would be scandalous!

You see, Jews were allowed only three marriages (and that many only under the most extreme circumstances) and if that same standard were applicable among the Samaritans, then this woman would have been considered immoral by her own people and, most certainly, by a Jew—AND even more so by a teacher of Jewish law!

And that's how this story has been repeatedly interpreted, mostly by male biblical scholars over the centuries... However, there may be a question worth examining in this last point...

Since the Hebrew word for "husband," ba'al, also means "Master" or "Lord" (and was used as a name for a pagan deity), some scholars, led by biblical scholar Raymond Brown, are beginning to believe that this part of the story may actually be a play on words.

- The woman, who symbolizes the Samaritan people, has five ba'im: not five husbands but rather five gods which were previously worshipped. This refers to the five deities from the five cities from which the foreign Samaritans came.
- The husband or the god, the "ba'al", she has now is not really her "ba'al," because her faith in Yahweh, the one true God of Israel, is impure.

Now I realize I'm asking a lot of you in this sermon, but hang in there with me, because I'm getting ready to land this plane.

When Jesus made these observations concerning her husbands...or better interpreted, when Jesus made these observations concerning her beliefs, the woman believes he must be a prophet.

So, now she wants to stump him with an ancient theological question. "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you people claim that the place where men ought to worship God is in Jerusalem."

But Jesus refuses to take the bait and says, "Believe me, woman, an hour is coming when you will worship the Father, neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."

And, finally, she says, "I know that the Messiah is coming... and when he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

Jesus says to her, with the deepest compassion, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

She had used up all of her excuses. She had used up every distraction.

The Christ is revealed and now everything is different for that woman. Not one single thing in her life is the same. Not the future she expects, not the pain she has lived with, not the fear she has endured, not the thirst she could never, ever quench. Nothing. Nothing.

Nothing is the same for that woman or for any of us.

Because, like the Samaritan woman, we know the Messiah has been coming for us, and now here he is, the one speaking to us in that still small voice.

The one pleading with us to listen.

The one hoping we might engage with God at whatever wells we may find him.

In whatever bars, or restaurants or shops or street corners, or work places... while walking the dog, playing with the grandchildren, listening to Mozart... can't you hear that still small voice?

“I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Now Jesus has one final exchange with his disciples who are shocked to find him speaking to a Samaritan woman... and equally shocked to find he hadn't eaten anything.... and then we hear the climax of the story. For the author of John, discipleship always involves faithful witness.

It seems that this woman was in such a hurry to tell people about what she had seen and heard that she left her water jar and went back to the city! (And, to translate that into contemporary terms, that would be like being so excited that you left your briefcase or your I-phone!)

The Gospel according to John says, “Many Samaritans believed in him because of that woman's testimony.”

That's how compelling her story was. That's how passionate and completely transformed she became.

And, what if they could say that about us?

That “many believed” because of our testimony, our witness, because of how we told our own story that changed everything for us?

Amen.

©2017 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022