

“THE BIG SURPRISE!”

**A SERMON BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
(4:5-42) AND PRESENTED AT ORLEAN UMC ON
MARCH 15, 2020-----THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT**

THAT STORY WE JUST HEARD OF JESUS

TALKING WITH A SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE

WELL OUTSIDE OF SYCHAR IS A STORY FULL OF
SURPRISES.....

THE BEST SURPRISE OF THEM ALL IS THAT THE
STORY HAS ROOM FOR US..... LET’S CONSIDER
NOW THIS SERIES OF SURPRISES.

THE FIRST SURPRISE IS THAT THE
CONVERSATION HAPPENS AT ALL. THE
BARRIERS TO IT ARE GREAT.

JESUS IS A JEW AND THE WOMAN IS A SAMARITAN..... BETWEEN SAMARITAN AND JEW THERE IS A WALL OF SEPARATION NO LESS THAN WHAT IN OUR TIME SEPARATES THE ISRAELI FROM THE PALESTINIAN.

THE JEWS AND SAMARITANS ARE RELATED PEOPLES..... BOTH ARE HEBREWS. THE SAMARITANS ARE FROM THE OLD NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL, WHILE THE JEWS ARE FROM THE OLD SOUTHERN KINGDOM OF JUDAH.

TO MAKE A LONG STORY SHORT, THE SAMARITANS INTER-MARRIED WITH NON-JEWISH PEOPLES, AND LOST MUCH OF THEIR ETHNIC IDENTITY, WHILE THE JEWS MAINTAINED THEIRS.

EACH GROUP ENDED UP WITH THEIR OWN
TEMPLE, THE SAMARITANS ON MOUNT GERIZIM,
THE JEWS ON MOUNT ZION..... AND SO IT IS
INDEED A STRANGE CHOICE JESUS MAKES TO
TRAVEL THROUGH SAMARITAN TERRITORY.
THAT HE STRIKES UP A CONVERSATION WITH A
SAMARITAN IS EVEN STRANGER.

THERE'S SOMETHING ADDITIONAL THAT MAKES
THIS CONVERSATION BESIDE THE WELL A
SURPRISE..... IN THAT PLACE AND IN THAT TIME
MEN AND WOMEN ARE NOT TO TALK TO ONE
ANOTHER IN PUBLIC..... IT IS NOT CONSIDERED
PROPER.....

ESPECIALLY IS THIS SO WHEN THE MAN IS, LIKE JESUS, A RABBI, A TEACHER, SOMEONE LOOKED UP TO AS AN EXAMPLE OF PROPRIETY. AND
THUS THE DISCIPLES, WHEN THEY RETURN, ARE
ASTONISHED THAT JESUS IS EVEN SPEAKING
WITH A WOMAN.

STILL MORE MUST BE SAID ABOUT THIS SURPRISING ENCOUNTER..... THE NAMELESS ONE IS A SAMARITAN, AND A WOMAN.....AND SHE IS ALSO SOMEONE REJECTED BY HER OWN PEOPLE..... *SHE COMES TO THE WELL TO DRAW WATER AT NOON, AND SHE COMES ALONE.*
NOON IS THE HOTTEST TIME OF THE DAY.

MORNING AND EVENING ARE TIMES TO DO THE HARD WORK OF DRAWING WATER FROM THE WELL, AND HAULING IT HOME. THIS IS WORK THAT WOMEN DO IN COMPANY WITH ONE ANOTHER..... IT IS A CHANCE FOR A CHAT, FOR SOME SOCIAL CONTACT..... BUT THIS WOMAN GOES TO THE WELL AT A TIME WHEN SHE WILL BE ALONE..... SHE SEES HERSELF AS A MISFIT. SHE AVOIDS OTHERS IN ORDER NOT TO BE HURT YET AGAIN BY THEIR WORDS, THEIR ATTITUDES, THEIR HARD LOOKS.

IT IS A SURPRISE, THEREFORE, THAT THIS CONVERSATION EVEN HAPPENS.... BUT THE CONVERSATION ITSELF CONTAINS MORE THAN ONE SURPRISE.

IT'S A SURPRISE THAT JESUS PROMISES LIVING WATER..... LIVING WATER IS WATER THAT FLOWS, THAT RUNS, THAT SPARKLES. SUCH WATER IS A WELCOME CHANGE FROM WATER IN WELLS OR CISTERNS THAT MAY BE FLAT OR EVEN STAGNANT.

JESUS AND THE WOMAN MEET BESIDE AN ANCIENT WELL THAT'S MORE THAN A HUNDRED FEET DEEP AND SEVEN FEET WIDE.

AT FIRST THE WOMAN PRESUMES THAT JESUS IS TALKING ABOUT SOME HIDDEN STREAM HE KNOWS THAT IS FAR BETTER THAN THIS WELL. SHE WANTS THE EQUIVALENT OF A FAUCET IN HER KITCHEN, SO SHE WON'T HAVE TO HAUL BUCKETS ANY MORE, AND WHO CAN BLAME HER? -----BUT WHAT JESUS PROMISES IS A SOURCE OF LIFE IN HER HEART, SO THAT SHE CAN TRULY LIVE. SHE IS CONFUSED ABOUT WHAT HE OFFERS, YET SHE UNDERSTANDS IT IS SOMETHING SHE NEEDS, AND NEEDS DESPERATELY.

IT'S A SURPRISE THAT JESUS KNOWS THE
DETAILS OF THIS STRANGER'S LIFE. THOSE
DETAILS REMAIN UNCLEAR TO US, BUT IT'S
APPARENT THAT SHE'S HAD A PAINFUL AND
UNHAPPY TIME. SHE'S HAD FIVE HUSBANDS.....

DID THE MARRIAGES END THROUGH DEATH, OR
DIVORCE, OR DESERTION? WERE THEY TRULY
MARRIAGES, OR SOMETHING ELSE? WHY IS HER
CURRENT HUSBAND NOT TRULY HER HUSBAND?
WE DON'T HAVE ANSWERS TO THESE
QUESTIONS, AND PERHAPS WE DO NOT NEED TO
HAVE THEM.

YET WE RECOGNIZE THAT THIS WOMAN FEELS ALONE AND EXILES HERSELF FROM HER NEIGHBORS.

THE WOMAN IS SURPRISED THAT JESUS KNOWS THE TRUTH ABOUT HER..... SHE IS EVEN MORE SURPRISED THAT, KNOWING THE TRUTH, HE ACCEPTS HER..... FOR HER, THIS IS AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE HOLY. THE MAN MUST BE A PROPHET.

AND SO WE COME TO ANOTHER SURPRISE. THE
WOMAN ASKS JESUS TO RESOLVE THE LONG-
STANDING AND DIVISIVE QUESTION OF WHO IS
RIGHT: JEWS OR SAMARITANS? WHICH IS THE
CORRECT TEMPLE: GERIZIM OR JERUSALEM?
THE SURPRISE COMES WHEN JESUS RAISES THE
ISSUE TO A NEW LEVEL. TRUE WORSHIP WILL NO
LONGER BE DEPENDENT ON LOCATION, BUT
WILL BE A MATTER OF SPIRIT AND TRUTH.

THE CONVERSATION ENDS WITH ONE MORE
SURPRISE. THE WOMAN CONFESSES HER FAITH
IN THE MESSIAH WHO IS TO COME, AND JESUS
SAYS THAT HE IS THAT MESSIAH.

JESUS THUS REVEALS HIS IDENTITY NOT TO HIS
DISCIPLES, NOT TO HIS OWN PEOPLE, NOT TO
THEIR RELIGIOUS LEADERS, BUT TO THIS
PERSON WHO IS MARGINAL THREE TIMES OVER:
SHE IS A SAMARITAN, A WOMAN, AND AN EXILE
AMONG HER OWN KIND. WE DO NOT EVEN KNOW
HER NAME, YET JESUS ENTRUSTS HER WITH HIS
DEEPEST SECRET, THE TRUTH OF WHO HE IS.

THE CONVERSATION ENDS BECAUSE THE
DISCIPLES COME BACK FROM THEIR TRIP TO
BUY FOOD, BUT THE SURPRISES DO NOT END.

THE WOMAN LEAVES HER WATER JAR THERE AT THE WELL..... IT IS VALUABLE, YET IT IS HEAVY, AND SHE WANTS TO BE UNENCUMBERED AS SHE RUNS BACK INTO THE CITY.

THERE IN SYCHAR, SHE TELLS PEOPLE TO COME AND SEE JESUS. SHE TESTIFIED, "HE TOLD ME EVERYTHING THAT I DID!"

SOON A CROWD FOLLOWS HER OUT TO THE WELL. SO LARGE IS THIS CROWD THAT JESUS COMPARES IT TO FIELDS READY TO BE HARVESTED. THESE PEOPLE HAVE ACCEPTED THE WOMAN'S TESTIMONY, AND THEY ARE COMING TO JESUS.

IT'S A SURPRISE THAT SOMEONE LIKE THIS
BEARS WITNESS..... AFTER ALL, SHE IS A REJECT
AMONG HER PEOPLE, A WOMAN WITH NO NAME,
NO SOCIAL STANDING..... HER EXPERIENCE WITH
JESUS IS VERY BRIEF, SHE HAS NO TRAINING,
SHE HAS NOT BEEN GIVEN A COMMISSION..... IT'S
A SURPRISE THAT PEOPLE HEED HER. YET THEY
DO, FOR THERE IS SOMETHING ATTRACTIVE,
COMPELLING, AND AUTHENTIC ABOUT HER
WITNESS.

HERE THEN WE HAVE YET ANOTHER SURPRISE
IN A SURPRISING STORY. THIS UNLIKELY
PROSPECT BECOMES A WITNESS TO JESUS, AND
AN EFFECTIVE ONE.

TRUE, SHE MAY BE A WOMAN OF
QUESTIONABLE CHARACTER, OR AT LEAST SHE
HAS HAD PLENTY OF EXPERIENCE WITH THE
ROUGH EDGES OF LIFE.

TRUE, HER UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS IS FAR
FROM COMPLETE.

YET SHE BEARS WITNESS BASED ON HER
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. SHE SPEAKS OF WHAT
SHE KNOWS.

HER FOCUS IS ON JESUS, NOT ON HERSELF.

AND NOT ONLY DOES SHE POINT HER OWN
PEOPLE TO JESUS, BUT SHE SHOWS US HOW WE
CAN WITNESS TO HIM.

IF JESUS HAS SPOKEN TO US, ACCEPTED US,
LED US TO SEE OURSELVES DIFFERENTLY, THEN
WE CAN BEAR WITNESS TO OTHERS EVEN AS
SHE DID.

WE DON'T NEED TO HAVE OUR LIFE TOGETHER
IN EVERY WAY. WE DON'T NEED TO KNOW ALL
THERE IS TO KNOW. WHAT WE CAN DO IS TELL
OTHERS OUR EXPERIENCE, AND LEAVE THE
RESULTS TO GOD.

WHETHER BECOMING THE CENTER OF
ATTENTION IS WHAT WE WANT OR WHAT WE
FEAR, THAT IS NOT THE ISSUE, THAT IS NOT THE
PURPOSE.

WE CAN HELP PEOPLE TO LOOK, NOT AT US,
BUT OVER OUR SHOULDER AT JESUS WHO
STANDS CLOSE BEHIND US.

THEN SOON ENOUGH THEY WILL FORGET ABOUT
OUR WITNESS, AND SAY, ALONG WITH THOSE
PEOPLE FROM SYCHAR, "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."

GOD SURPRISES US IN MANY WAYS, BUT NONE IS MORE SURPRISING THAN OUR OPPORTUNITY TO WITNESS TO CHRIST BASED ON OUR OWN EXPERIENCE. I HAVE SPOKEN TO YOU IN THE NAME OF THIS GOD OF SURPRISES: AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND FOR ME-----AMEN....