

Jesus and Photini Choose the Better Way
March 12, 2023: The Third Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA



May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight oh lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last summer while on Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, our group visited what has been venerated for 17 centuries as the very place where this morning's encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman occurred. Far from being out in a barren, exposed place, open to the heat and crunchy dust, the well is in the cool undercroft of St. Photini's Church, the latest in a succession of churches built over the well, beginning in the late 4th century. Photini means "enlightened one." It is the name given in the Greek Orthodox tradition to the brave and plucky Samaritan woman. The site is situated in what is now the town of Nablus, in the West Bank, the name for the area of about 2300 square miles, (to the left of the Jordan River when you look at the map) occupied by the State of Israel since 1967. It has become place of terrible violence.

But for us, it's very tame, though crowded, as we pilgrims make our way down the steps to take turns cranking the handle that lowers a small bucket, connected to a long rope, into the water some 20 meters below. People wash their hands with it, some make the sign of the cross on their foreheads with it, some are brave enough to drink it. We have our pictures taken in the process. We have all made some effort to get there, from all over the world. We are moved by our proximity through the ages to this momentous conversation between Jesus and Photini, a conversation that changes the world. But it is a controlled, curated experience....

... a far cry from that hot day nearly 2000 years ago, when Jesus and Photini meet at high noon. Jesus has made a course correction. Some of the religious authorities were beginning to turn up the heat on him in Jerusalem—where last week's conversation with Nicodemus takes place—and so he decides to head home to Galilee, about 80 miles north as the crow flies. He has a choice of routes: he can take the longer, safer one, along the narrow plain that sidles beside the Jordan River as it runs north toward Sea of Galilee. Or he can take the shorter route, a more direct one, which takes him through the rugged terrain of Samaria.

Jews had held Samaritans in disdain for centuries, ever since they had intermarried with Assyrian conquerors in the 8th century before Jesus. The religious and social heritage they had held in common fell by the wayside, particularly the devotion to the Temple in Jerusalem, and in its place grew distance, prejudice, and hostility.

The lines just before our passage say this: "Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he *had* to go through Samaria." (John 4.3b, 4, my emphasis.) He *didn't have* to go through Samaria. He *chose* to go through Samaria. Do we think it was because Jesus was in a hurry? Jesus is almost never in a hurry.

For a first century Jew to walk through Samaritan territory was something akin, for example—back before the Good Friday accords of 1998—to a Roman Catholic walking through Belfast in Northern Ireland working his rosary in his hand; or for a Protestant to walk through Dublin in the Irish Republic draped

in an orange-colored flag. Or closer to home, and perhaps less dramatic, but no less real, like a white person walking through parts of Dorchester, or a Black person walking through parts of Needham.

Was walking through Samaria somehow connected to Jesus' mission?

And so, we meet him at Jacob's well in the middle of the day, about halfway back to Galilee, having walked something like 40 miles. Where had he and the disciples spent the night? Was there some shade? Was he just sitting on a rock? Why does he sit in the hot sun and send the disciples into town for some take out? Why doesn't he go with them?

A Samaritan woman makes her way to the well, alone, with her water jar, in the middle of the day. Why would she do this? Typically, women, (and getting water was women's work) would come, in a group, in the cool of the morning or evening. It was a communal, public space, an ancient near eastern variation on the prototypical water cooler in the office, a place to get a drink for sure, but also a place of gossip, information, fellowship. That she was there alone, in the middle of the day, suggests that she has been shunned by the women of her community. It may have something to do with her history with men, which Jesus unearths rather bluntly. I wonder what that felt like to her?

The fact that Jesus engages her is shocking to her. He is a man, and apparently, somehow obviously to her, a Jewish man, and double no-no for her. Jews and Samaritans do not associate; men and women do not share public spaces. But she charges in. What does she have to lose?

And thus begins one of the most important conversations in Christian History.

A conversation that begins with water for a parched palate, for washing and cooking, and moves to water that nourishes the soul; from a space of inconvenience, discomfort, and misunderstanding comes an awkward but life-giving dialogue between a tired and thirsty Jewish man, and a shunned and harried Samaritan woman who comes to be known and honored in all her complexity; our gradual hymn refers to one who came to Jesus "worn and sad; he has made me glad." This is the Samaritan woman.

A conversation that starts from the getting of water, goes to domestic arrangements and proper worship, then erupts into Jesus' self-revelation as the I AM, the Holy One who created all things, who revealed the Divine Self at Sinai to the Israelites in the wilderness.

From focusing on the filling of her bucket comes the discovery of the One who fills the deepest thirsts of her soul for belonging and community.

From a conversation between two people, speaking alone, way outside the conventions of their society, comes the transformation of a woman and her entire village into a little piece of the Kingdom of God.

I wonder what our situations are, what journey we might be on today or tomorrow or on a farther horizon? I wonder what inconvenience or obstacles may stand in the way of our building a little bit of the

Jesus and Photini Choose the Better Way
March 12, 2023: The Third Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA



kingdom of God in our backyard, or our workplace? I wonder what may be possible in the way of healing or reconciliation for us or someone we know?

Jesus and Photini choose a path that begins with inconvenience and discomfort, a path that leads to reconciliation, healing, and life for them, and for the whole world.

I wonder when we choose to do the same?

Amen.

Sources consulted:

A Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John, Malina/Rohrbaugh

Feasting on the Gospels, John, Volume 1, Jarvis and Johnson, eds

Sermon Brainwave for March 12, 2023 <https://youtu.be/YyrB7bMXVo>

Preaching through the Christian Year, Year A, Craddock et. al., eds