

Denice Leslie
February 24, 2008
Lent 3 Year A
John 4: 5 – 32

“Something Beautiful”

God Comes Down

A seminary student “tells of a time in seminary when she was listening to an uninteresting lecture on a beautiful day.

Apparently the professor saw that nobody was paying attention because he closed his notebook and stopped talking.

But, before leaving the lecture hall, he picked up a piece of chalk and going to the blackboard he drew a huge arrow pointing straight down.

He stood back and told the class, “If you understand that, you understand everything you need to know about what it means to be a Christian ...” and with that he left the room.

Everyone sat there staring at the arrow pointing downward. The seminary student admits that the most logical thing she could think was, “He thinks we’re all going to hell.”

But the next time the class met the professor began his lecture by drawing that same arrow on the board. This time he had everyone’s complete attention.

“Here’s what this means,” he told them. “God always comes down. God always comes down. There is never anything that we can do to turn that arrow around and make our way UP to God. God came down in Jesus. And God still comes down.....God ALWAYS COMES”¹

God Comes to the Samaritan Woman

But not for me. That is what the Samaritan woman felt. Hopeless. Have you ever felt totally and irrevocably hopeless? I mean convinced to the core of your bones that there was no hope.

I remember when I was a seminary student and trying to get pregnant. And nothing worked. When I thought I was I wasn’t and when I finally was I miscarried. It was hopeless. I was convinced. And life was empty.

Life is empty for this woman. She’s had how many husbands? Did the first one die? Did the marriage end in divorce?

Did hope bloom two or three times only to be dashed? So that by the fifth time she was hollow to the core.

Was it the leverite marriage arrangement where the family passed her along hoping to find one man who would take care of her? No wonder the man she was with now was not her husband. It was hopeless.

The text tells us Jesus had to pass through Samaria to get to Galilee. Now if you know anything about the Holy Land you know this is not a geography lesson. You don’t have to pass through Samaria to get to Galilee. You can travel along the Jordan River Valley just as easily.

What John’s gospel is telling us is Jesus had an appointment he had to keep in Samaria. An appointment with Photimi. That’s the Orthodox Church’s name for her—the woman at the well. It means “enlightened one” because she was open to the Messiah.

That’s what the story tells us isn’t it? This is a looong story! In fact it is the longest conversation Jesus has with any one in the whole of the New Testament!

Jesus comes to this nobody, outcast, and diluted faith Samaritan—and woman who is an adultress at this point in her life—which makes her a as on the bottom of the pile as you can be. I mean even beasts of burden were considered more valuable in this part of the world than a woman but a woman in her situation?

Jewish men didn’t speak to women who were not members of their family to begin with. But to speak to a Samaritan woman and a self-identified adulterous, well, Jesus disciples are not just shocked when they see this, they are speechless—its scandalizing to the point of not being right to them.

¹ —Kelly A. Fryer, Reclaiming the “L” Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg)

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Jesus asks her for a drink of water, and then he presses her for more conversation about her personal life. This is not just a passing of the time of day. This is an intimate conversation about her marital relations—her place in life: no place. No hope. No body. A cipher in the sandy hot sun of noon at Jacob's well.

And what an irony is this? To meet at Jacob's well, this historically romantic spot where the patriarch of the Jewish faith, Jacob meets and kisses Rachel, the love of his life and eventual wife?

Yet this is a love story. God comes at the appointed time just for Photimi. Jesus goes out of his way to get to Galilee by detouring to Samaria.

And once he gets there he not only discusses the most intimate details of her life, he also confides in her of all people---she is the very first person in John's gospel to whom he chooses to reveal himself. Jesus tells her, "I am he (the Messiah) the one you are speaking to."

Her thirst is greater than his. Isn't it?

He asked her for water. She in turn ends up begging for this Living Water. She is thirsting for the hope only God can give her.

So when he gives her himself, she forgets herself—leaves her water jar by the well and runs off to share what she has found with the whole community. The Samaritan woman meets Jesus, and in him receives compassion, forgiveness, insight and new life---transformed!

She steps out of the shadows and away from the fringe of her community and into the light of noon day, into the middle of the town square and shouts her news to one and all—as a new person: Photimi—the first apostle of John's gospel. A model for all of us.

And what does she tell the people of her town she has experienced?

"Something beautiful, something good. All my confusion he understood. All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife, but he made something beautiful of my life."

God Comes to US

"Did you know that one of the most beautiful and cherished items in all the world, a diamond, is nothing more than carbon dust — ashes, in other words — that has been exposed to pressure?

Some of us remember learning this as kids, while watching the original Superman TV series, the one starring George Reeves.

There's a scene, in one of those episodes, in which Superman takes a lump of coal in his hand and squeezes it very hard.

He grunts. He grimaces. Smoke comes out of his clenched fist. Yet, when he opens his hand, the lump of coal is gone. A glittering diamond has taken its place.

In God's hand, the ashes of a human life are more than mere refuse, to be carted away. By the amazing power we call grace; we can be transformed from our natural state of sin into something strong and beautiful.

And how do we know this is true? Because of another journey from dust to diamonds, a journey taken 2,000 years ago by a man named Jesus. He went to a cross and died. They laid him in a borrowed tomb. Three days later, he stood upon his feet and lived again."²

For what purpose? To make something beautiful of our lives.

² Homiletics Illustrations, Beautiful.