

February 4, 2018
A Theological Necessity
Annette Hill Briggs
John 4:1-42

[Jesus and the Woman of Samaria]

4 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”²—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴ But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “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.” ¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?” ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"
²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,
²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"
³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something."
³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."
³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?"
³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.
³⁵ Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.
³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.
³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.'
³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."
⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.
⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word.
⁴² They said to the woman, "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."

How come, in chapter 1 of John, when Nathaniel is so amazed that Jesus knew him before he met him, nobody assumes Nathaniel had a sordid sexual past? But when Photene says, "Come see the man who told me everything I ever did," Christian history assumed she was a prostitute? Oh yes, "Photene." Some Christian traditions have a name for her: Photene. It means "bright as the sun" or "enlightened one" – a name NOT based on the notion that she was a *bad girl of the Bible*. Which I knew had to be a book title – so I amazed it.

In fact it's a three-book series: [Bad Girls of the Bible](#); [Really Bad Girls of the Bible](#); and [Slightly Bad Girls of the Bible](#). "Photene" is NOT based on her "bad girl" status, but rather on the rapid-fire, historically informed, theologically rich discourse that she and Jesus maintain over several paragraphs. *Woman at the Well* is how I've always known her, her entire personhood summed up in a verse-and-a-half: five marriages and currently living with someone – a character sketch that requires us to believe that Jesus slut-shamed a woman to make no particular point. It's not as if he called her to repentance. He drops it as soon as he says it. I don't like the sound of the sentence any more than you: *Jesus slut-shamed someone*. Know a better way to say it? How about don't say it? Nope. Sorry. Actually, not sorry.

If we grow up blaming her, believing she was such a bad girl, we can at least admit that Jesus is the one who brought it up. The fact is, we don't know anything but the barest information, nothing of the why and the how – the parts of any story that explain a person's life and history. I assume Jesus knew everything there was to know. And he didn't blame her. He didn't judge her. All the moral innuendo has been injected into the story by the church since. And if this is the sliver of text chosen to build her character, why does the assumption have to be scandalous? Why can't it be tragic?

Alternatively, we COULD go with the abundance of other verses in the text. This is Jesus' longest recorded conversation in the gospel. This is his first self-revelation as *The Christ*. Everyone else up to this point – including the official disciples – have only been given signs. She gets the straight-up truth. *"I can see you are a prophet,"* she says. Remember that nothing ever means just one thing in John. *Seeing* is always a theological activity. *Seeing* is believing. *Seeing* is faith. *Seeing* only happens in the *light*.

Unlike Nicodemus, Photene meets Jesus in the daytime – the brightest time of day, high noon. She was as *ready* to meet him as any disciple anywhere so far. No wonder Jesus HAS to go through Samaria. Samaria was part of Israel, a region between Galilee to the north and Judea to the south. Judeans and Galileans traveling back and forth generally went *around*, not *through*, Samaria, intentionally avoiding contact with the people there. Why?

Racism. Segregation, plain and simple. Judeans and Galileans believed themselves better Jews than Samaritans, to the point they didn't really consider them Jews at all. Remember all those years – 700, 600, 500, 400 years before – when one group after another invaded and occupied Israel? Jews from Israel and Judah were both carted off into exile in Egypt and Babylon? But most Samaritans stayed put and were occupied by the foreigners – Assyrians especially, who took them as slaves and wives. They maintained Jewish faith and practice as best they could, for generations. Then King Cyrus of Persia, in the 5th century BCE, began allowing exiles to go back. A few did, the ones who had not intermarried with Babylonians.

They intended to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. Jews in Samaria assumed they'd be integrated back into Jewish religious life. They assumed wrong. (Please know that I know I am skipping enormous swaths of Bible text and history.) Jerusalem was a wasteland. They might have welcomed the help. They didn't. *"Y'all are nasty people,"* they told the Samaritans. *"We don't want anything to do with you."* And were still treating them that way 400 years later, into the time of Jesus.

We know Jews did business in Samaria and vice versa. The story of the Good Samaritan tells us that. Money rarely respects racial segregation, since it's all green! Amen? Socio-political, but mostly **religious**, history drove the racism and segregation between Judean-Galilean and Samaritan Jews in Jesus' time. I would offer that this same religious

history drove Jesus *through* Samaria instead of *around* it; that Jesus went *through Samaria* out of *theological necessity*; that he could not and can not be the Savior of the world, nor even the Savior of Israel, without tending to this profound injustice called Samaria.

Israel proper can ignore it, pretend that it is in the past, that they have much greater concerns these 400 years later. But so long as they have neighbors who still know themselves marginalized, disenfranchised and dismissed from their own faith and country, Jesus will not go along.

Samaria. As I read her now I realize that is her name. John has embodied and given voice to all of Samaria in the woman at the well. I have this notion of Jesus taking his disciples on a field trip, and likewise John his church – a local tour past their own people's history of apathy and injustice. Only it isn't ancient history, because we carry our history within us. It is here in all our relationships. They cannot escape it, pretend it is over and done. Not on Jesus' watch.

On Jesus' watch these modern Galilean men will not ignore or deny the damage done to their southern neighbors, damage that affects them in the here and now of their life together as believers in the same God and citizens of the same country. 400-year-old damage is not history, when modern neighbors cannot walk through each other's neighborhoods. Therefore Jesus **had to go through** Samaria. His disciples' utter shock at seeing Jesus speaking with a woman is telling of their own deeply embedded bias, their prejudice. Not necessarily the kind one is proud of. Sometimes we are shocked by our own prejudice, aren't we? They have no language at all for what they are *seeing*. *Seeing* is theological activity, remember.

Feeling the anxiety of having no language, they decide to eat instead – and try to get Jesus to eat with them. I'm sympathetic to this idea. Eating has often been my *go-to* plan in such situations. But Jesus refuses. That is the thing about Jesus: he never does what we think he should do, only what HE wants. Going where HE wants. Talking to whomever HE wants. Paying no attention to the rules everyone else is trying to follow. Jesus seems to have his own set ideas about everything: politics, society, economics, gender and religion.

His disciples fall silent and have a picnic, which is not the escape they wish it was. Because when they stand up again, they'll be in a crowd of Samaritan brothers and sisters in Christ – which is going to make it really, really awkward to keep walking around Samaria, having seen what they've seen, knowing what they know now. While Samaria, for her part, is all in.

Compare her to Nicodemus for a minute. He came to Jesus in the night, but she meets him in the day. He just sort of faded out when Jesus started talking, but she keeps up

with him as well as any rabbi would. I told you Nicodemus lapped the Sons of Thunder (Peter, James and John), but that took three years. Samaria lapped Nicodemus in three hours! Became a preacher and led a village to the Lord! Three hours, and a lifetime of heartache, prayer and faith – faith that starts out as suspicion that the world as she'd been told it was could not possibly be all that God intended for God's people and for her. Suspicious faith that can get really hard to keep carrying, when everyone around you acts like you might be crazy and you end up lonelier than you'd like to be.

But not so lonely you can give up hope for the greater part that you can almost taste in one prayer out of a hundred. Something I don't get: if Jesus was so progressive on gender matters, how come he didn't just get his own water?

And why didn't Samaria just get him some water without being so sassy? *"Give me a drink,"* he said. She said, *"How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"* These two lines are charged with each person's awareness of his privilege. He is inviting her to join him in that world-view she has only suspected might be true, for God knows how long. And she takes to it like a duck to water. Likewise, John invites the church to Jesus' view – of everything, including the past.

As per the gospel, friends, we know where Jesus is headed: the cross, the grave, the skies. He didn't ask the disciples' input on that plan. Sometimes we forget he also chose the route, including Samaria: the events, history, traumas, injustice that we've tried to convince ourselves are over and done, that have nothing to do with us, that have no force in our lives or our life together today – our personal lives, our community life, our national life. He would not let his first disciples keep pretending, nor does he call his church to pretend either.

In this new day, as we face the meaning of biblical justice, may we also find the courage to face the truth of our past and do our best, with God's merciful help, to make it right. Would you pray with me?