

## *5. Shocking Encounter*

### *CHRIST ENCOUNTERS*

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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

### **Introduction to the Morning Lesson**

We continue our reflections on the story in John's Gospel when Jesus met the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. So far in the story Jesus has been talking to the woman alone, his disciples having gone into the village to buy food. The story starts with the woman wondering how it was that Jesus would even speak to her. In their conversations he gradually reveals more of who he is to her, to the point that at the end of the text last week, he reveals himself as the Messiah. And as the revelation increases the woman changes. She moves from skepticism to interest to belief. Her life is changing and that's where we'll pick up the story.

John 4.27-30 (NRSV)

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?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

### **Introduction**

It was quickly obvious what to name this CHRIST ENCOUNTER: shocking. The returning disciples were astonished that Jesus was talking to a Samaritan woman. I have described many times in these sermons so far what revulsion most Jews had for Samaritans. That along with the lowly status of women made Jesus' behavior shocking at best, maybe even scandalous. Jesus flaunted convention at every turn.

The disciples clearly saw that when they returned. But they were quiet, just the opposite of the woman. She bantered with Jesus, challenged him, asked questions. That's how she came to faith. But the disciples are just shocked and they remain silent, which is to say, faithless. All these sermons are about encountering Christ. When we do that, we can be like the disciples and stay the same, or we can be like the woman and open ourselves to new possibilities. The way the woman encountered Christ is more faithful.

### **The shock of acceptance**

So for a few minutes this morning I want to talk about this shocking encounter. But not the shock of the disciples over Jesus doing what wasn't acceptable. I want to talk about the shock of the woman, the shock that she was accepted by Jesus. That's not to say that everything about her was right. In fact, many things were wrong. But his accepting and valuing her didn't put her off. In fact, it moved her to follow him.

The woman was shocked that Jesus was someone who accepted her. He told her everything she had ever done and a lot of what she had done was not good. But somehow, we have to say, somehow by the grace of God, Jesus' truthfulness freed her and liberated her. She left her water jar

— the reason she had gone to the well in the first place — and went back to her city. Even more shocking, when she confessed to people who knew her, many of whom would not have liked her or respected her, they wanted to meet Jesus too. By being who she was, she drew others to Jesus.

One of the things I have come to deeply appreciate and love about this church is the time during worship on most Sundays — not all but most — when we share joys and concerns and share together in praying, “O Lord, hear our prayer.” Sometimes the expressed joys and concerns are simple and routine, sometimes deeply serious and even tragic. Occasionally they are humorous and often move all our hearts deeply. I have come to believe that this experience of joys and concerns is an extremely important part of who we are as church family.

I admit that I did not think this when I first arrived. All of my previous ministry experience was at larger churches with larger sanctuaries and many more people in attendance. So the intimacy of sharing we find in a room this size with 50, 75, even a 100 present is impossible in much larger settings. In fact, quite a few years ago, long before I even knew Sudbury existed, I read a description about a smaller church’s experience of joys and concerns. And I wrote in my journal that we can’t do that in worship here but we need to do it elsewhere. The problem was I’m not sure we ever really did do it elsewhere at that church in any sufficient way. I’m so glad we do it here.

And just so you know — what is shared here isn’t lost when worship is over. The elder or deacon who serves as liturgist that morning writes everything down as best she or he can and later emails the joys and concerns to one of our deacons who in turn emails them to the many people on our “prayer chain.” So the joys and concerns that are prayed over here continue to be prayed over for days and sometimes even weeks.

Kathleen Norris, one of my favorite authors, lives in the small town of Lemmon, South Dakota, and worships in a church that I guess would be a little smaller than ours size-wise<sup>1</sup> in the middle, of course, of a much less populated area. She describes how important the joys and concerns are in that small church in that small town. She also notes how the sharing of joys and concerns is a delight to the gossips. She says that Sunday afternoon the phone lines in town are hot with news that’s been picked up in church. But she comments that mostly this is a good kind of gossip because its main effect is to widen the prayer circle. She says she herself often goes home with notes written on her bulletin: so-and-so is in the hospital, send a card, plan a visit, and so forth.

She also notes how sometimes the worship service goes into a kind of “suspended animation” as people share in occasionally too much detail about medical conditions of family or loved ones. And she says — and this happens here too — “We wince; we squirm; we sigh, and it’s good for us.” It’s good for us because a big part of ministering to one another is simply listening. People in crisis need to tell their story and the best thing we can do is sit and listen and, of course, pray.

Norris tells how during one joys and concerns someone shared that Bill O’Rourke had passed away. “Wild Bill” he was called in his drinking days and while he never came to church all that much, all the old-timers knew him. Most also knew that he had been failing for some time in a veteran’s hospital a couple of hundred miles away.<sup>2</sup> Everyone who remembered Bill remembered him as quite a character — a true cowboy. In fact, he broke horses for the U.S. Cavalry between the

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<sup>1</sup> According to online PCUSA statistics the Spencer Memorial Presbyterian Church in Lemmon, South Dakota had a membership of 135 at the end of 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Lemmon and Sturgis, where the veteran’s hospital is, are actually 165 miles distant.

two world wars. When his death was announced a sigh ran through the congregation. All but youngest members and the young, fresh-out-of-seminary pastor had their own Bill stories. It was kind of an awkward moment. The pastor was about to start praying. And then someone at the back of the church, one of Bill's oldest friends, said, "You know, Bill paid me the first fifty cents I ever made, back in 1930." The minister smiled thinly, not quite sure what to say. He bowed his head, ready to pray again, and someone else from the back pew said, "Yeah, and I'll bet you still have that fifty cents."

Of course, then everyone, even the nonplussed young minister laughed for a good, long time. Then Norris adds something very wise — and this is the whole point of the story. She wrote, "When the minister finally got to say his 'Let us pray,' we were ready. We had been praying, all along. We had been being ourselves before God."<sup>3</sup>

They were being themselves before God. That's what the woman at the well discovered in her encounter with Jesus, that she was being herself before God and she was still valued and still accepted. It shocked her so much that she left her water jar at the well — she had something more important now than water — and ran back home to tell everyone and invite them to "come and see" this man she had met.

## Conclusion

We'll continue the story next week. But when the woman tells her family and friends to come and see this man who knew her and still accepted her, she ended with a question. "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" The question embraces us with the freedom of Christ's encounter. When we meet him we don't have to know it all or understand it all. We don't have to have it all figured out or stop asking questions. To encounter Jesus is to continue a journey, not end it.

I told you I've been reading C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The fifth book in the series is called *The Horse and His Boy* which tells the story of a boy name Shasta. Shasta has a difficult journey in Narnia because he must ride to warn King Lune of the impending attack by the armies of the evil Tash. Shasta rides alone through a mountain pass in the dark of night. He rides an unfamiliar horse that won't obey his commands. In his misery he thinks he is the most unfortunate boy in the whole world. And then he becomes suddenly aware of a large presence alongside him. That presence is the great lion Aslan, the ruler of Narnia. But Shasta doesn't know him yet.

Finally the boy speaks out in fear, "Who are you?"

The great lion, still at this point only known as a large, fearsome presence to Shasta, says to the boy, "I am one who has waited long for you to speak. Tell me your sorrows." (Speak like the woman, not be silent like the disciples.)

So Shasta does. He complains to the large voice of his dangerous journey, his frightening experience with lions, his unhappy childhood, and how he is hungry and thirsty and cold.

The answer of Aslan shocks Shasta: "I do not call you unfortunate . . ." <sup>4</sup>

In other words, Shasta is blessed. He is on the right road. He learns many things about his own life and journey, and the path where even now he has a task to do. The danger is still real,

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996) 280-281.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (New York: Collier Books, 1970) 155-158.

Shasta is still tired and hungry, but he has been blessed to encounter the great Aslan and journey with him.

So it is with Jesus Christ. Shocking though it may be, he encounters us in freedom and bids us journey with him.

He cannot be the Messiah, can he?

Yes, he can. Thanks be to God.