

I am he, the one who is speaking to you

Exodus 17:1–7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1–11

John 4:5–42

Text: John 4:25-26

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.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

Introduction

Last fall I participated in a course of study at Tyndale Seminary; we met weekly in an online format. In that environment you ‘see’ the other students in little squares on the computer screen. You hear each other’s responses to questions raised by the subject matter. In that process you get to know one another a little bit. On one evening of the study a young student shared a matter of personal spiritual angst; another student, endeavouring to encourage, shared his own personal story of how it was not that long ago that he was in the clutches of drug addiction in a downward spiral and of our Lord’s rescue.

1. Everyone has a story. I got thinking about how I saw each of these young students as I met them in these little squares on the screen. I participated with them in this very narrow slice of their lives for a couple of hours each week. For me, each of them was a bright young person studying in answer to God’s call on their lives to serve. I suppose, for them, I was the old veteran auditing the course mining its content for nuggets to use in preaching. When I saw this bright, well-spoken young man studying theology, it was easy to imagine his life as one that had ever been onward and upward. It wasn’t that I was surprised that someone in the course could have struggled with drug addiction. It was a reminder to me that everyone has a story and difficulties are common in most of our stories. It was a reminder about the conclusions I so readily draw upon meeting another.

I remember the first time I met (the late) Bill Newnham; Bill was the first president of Seneca College and instrumental in its founding. I met him here in the sanctuary after church one Sunday in 2003 shortly after I came to Central. I was eager to learn people’s names and when he told me his, without any knowledge of his work, I asked, is Newnham spelled the same as the Newnham campus of Seneca College? Reluctantly he admitted he had worked there and the campus was

named after him. When you meet someone at the apex of their influence it is easy to imagine a life trajectory of one success to another. As I got to know Bill I learned this was not necessarily the case for him. Everyone has a story.

“So he (Jesus) came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water” So, what do you see? A woman has come at noon to draw water. At first glance we see a woman going about the daily duties of life. Maybe it is like how you see anyone going about their errands at noontime. Perhaps you are standing in a bank line waiting for a teller. The person in front of you has a ledger book in their hand with cheques they are depositing. You conclude that she has a business of some sort and is making deposits from sales or business activity. This must be someone who works hard, you think.

But what about a woman who goes to the well to draw water at noon? If you lived in Jesus’ day you would know that people did not go to draw water at noon—in the heat of the day. You went early in the morning or in the late afternoon or early evening. So why is she coming at noon? If you lived in that day and age you likely conclude that she comes then because she doesn’t want to meet anyone. Maybe she has something to hide. No one struggles through the heat of noon to fetch water without some special motivation. Everyone has a story. What’s hers?

As things unfold you learn something of her story. The story she told was, “I have no husband.” Technically she was correct. She had had five husbands and the one she is with now is not her husband. It does not take much imagination to understand why she comes to the well at a time when the other women from her town will not be there. We can also imagine that her regard for herself is at a low ebb. In that time an unattached woman (without a husband or a son) was vulnerable economically and socially. You know what people think; what’s wrong with her that she couldn’t make it work with at least one of the husbands. It is easy to blame difficult circumstances on the person in difficulty.

Jesus strikes up a conversation about water. We know that water quenches thirst. Jesus tells her of some ‘water’ that he offers that will quench the thirst she has that successive husbands has not satisfied. “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.’ ... 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.” In other words, the water that Jesus gives satisfies in such a way that you will never look anywhere else.

What do we do to quench thirst? Do we keep going to the same well again and again? Popularity, fame, beauty, sexual experience, substances that give us highs, entertainment, sports, travel, exploring nature? In our modern world the mystery of God who created the world has been eclipsed. We have shut ourselves off from the possibility that there is anything beyond. Our world sells sensation and freedom but not the peace hearts have craved. So we keep ourselves moving frantically from one activity to the next. How satisfying is that?

She doesn't know it yet, but she will discover that this was no chance meeting this day. Jesus doesn't just happen to be there. He is there to meet her. “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” Jesus claims to be the one she is truly looking for. He says the same to us in the midst of our own stories however we tell them. He wants to talk with you and me. He wants to listen to our heart. He knows the dissatisfactions modern people feel about the story we tell of our lives that this is a world with nothing beyond it. He knows the emptiness of it all. And he says the same to us, “I am he, the one you are looking for.” We don't even know that our angst is because we are cut off from relationship with him. Yet he comes to meet with us.

You notice that she tries to shut the conversation down by saying, you are a Jew and I am a Samaritan. She doesn't want to chat any further, the animosities are too great. Indeed Jesus is a Jew and the antisemitism alive in our world deflects people from hearing the story of God's incursion into the world in conversation with Israel and in his coming among us in the Jew named Jesus of Nazareth. Think about how many Christians don't think of the Jewishness of Jesus. In much of the art of the church Jesus is depicted as a white European. Jesus said, salvation is from the Jews. Does he offend you when he says this?

In our era, it is religion in general that is often distained as the problem of the world. “Get rid of religion and wars would cease,” some say. Christianity in particular is singled out for derision. I realize that the church is not a perfect institution. Still, it is our Lord's work to build the church. Can we set aside animosities towards the church to continue the conversation with this One who meets us at the well? Are we intrigued enough by his offer of water that will quench the true longing of our beings so completely that we will know we are at the end of our search?

One of the realities of difficulties or tragic events is that our hearts become hardened by them. If God loves me why is life so difficult? You may hear a trace of that in this woman's flippant response to Jesus' offer of living water, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." We read of hardness of heart in the story of Israel in the wilderness when they came to Rephidim and water wasn't readily available. They accused Moses of leading them into the desert just so they would die of thirst. Listen to how God pleads with us through the Psalmist, (who is referencing this wilderness story), "O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness." Will hardness of heart turn this woman away from Jesus? Will hardness of heart turn us away—think how readily people today invoke sexual scandal in the church to dismiss hearing the message of Jesus.

2. I invite you to move to the part of the story where this woman runs excitedly to tell the people of her town about what she found in Jesus. Notice that she left her water jar at the well to run to the city. That tells you two things, at least. One. She is planning to come back to see Jesus. Two. She found the water Jesus gave her did quench the thirst she longed to have satiated. Here is how she expressed it. 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'

'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! She knows that Jesus knows everything about her. She knows that he knows all the details of one failed marriage after another and of her current relationship. When she came to the well she comes alone to avoid people who know her story and condemn her for it, who look down on her as outcast and not worthy of friendship. Jesus knows all this and she discovers something very different about him. It isn't just the wonder that this stranger she meets for the first time knows all the details of her life that convinces her of Jesus' identify as Messiah.

We might express her excitement if we supplied the words her heart bursts to say. 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done—and yet he loves me! She has likely never known love like this in her entire life. You notice that as Jesus gently reveals his knowledge of her marriages he doesn't do so in a manner so as to castigate her. I know all about it and still I offer you living water that becomes a spring of water in you gushing up to eternal life. This encounter is so powerful that she suspects what her heart longs for. "I know that the Messiah is coming and he will proclaim all things to us." And Jesus responds, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.' In the gospels Jesus keeps his identity as Messiah quiet because of popular political aspirations people have of a Messiah. Jesus'

confession to this woman is one of the rare occasions where he tells someone directly.

3. I want to come back to truth of this text that this meeting at the well this day was no accident. Jesus comes there not just because he is tired. He comes at noon to meet her. The Bible tells us that the chief characteristic of the living God is that he speaks. Jesus said that when we hear his messengers preach the gospel we hear him. Your hearing this message today is not happenstance. Jesus has come among us to address each of us personally. The tug we sense in our hearts, the sense of his presence looming before us, the experience we have that more is going on in here than hearing the sound of a preacher's voice—this is Jesus speaking to our questions and uncertainties, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Young people today are cautious about giving allegiance to anyone; they have been schooled in the cultural proclamation that personal autonomy is the highest good. So the idea of giving your life to Christ is perceived as losing something important and so many are hesitant. On an April morning in 2005 the newly elected Pope Benedict gave his first papal sermon in St. Peter's Square. He began with the biblical exhortation, "Be not afraid." Here is some of what he said.

"Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to Him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom?"

"No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ — and you will find true life."¹

And given my own experience of Christ and life, I have to say that Benedict was not wrong. A profound Scottish preacher, Thomas Chalmers, used to speak of the

¹ <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/raymond-j-de-souza-benedict-xvis-lifelong-friendship-with-god>

Christian life as a life directed by “the expulsive power of a new affection.”
Unsatisfying things we once clung to fall away.

Jesus said, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’