

The Man At The Well
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Westminster Presbyterian Church - Ontario, CA
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John 4:5-42

We're all here in a church sanctuary. It is Sunday morning, the traditional time for a worship service. We've sung some hymns and songs. We've prayed some prayers. We've shared our joys and concerns. We've heard the Word Of God read and now, hopefully, we're going to hear it commented upon in a way that enhances our understanding. After that, we will return our gifts to God during the Offering. We'll sing some more, we'll hear a Charge and Benediction and we will then go back out into the world.

Since we're all here and we're all doing these things, it is safe to assume that most, if not all, of us are Christian and on a journey of faith. If not Christian, then on a faith journey of some sort.

We didn't just all show up here today spontaneously or coincidentally. That journey of faith, wherever we may each be individually, had to start somewhere. There was, at some point, a first step. I'm going to make the assumption that, for most of us, that first step came some time in childhood when our families introduced us to faith.

And I'm guessing that, for many of us, that first step happened so early in life that we no longer have any conscious memory of it. That first step might have happened as early as infancy when we were left in the care of a church nursery while our parents attended a worship service. It could have happened in toddler Sunday School or Sunday School at any level. It might have been singing "Jesus Loves Me" for the first time. It might have been coloring a picture of Jesus. It might have been seeing a Christmas manger scene for the first time.

Now, many have begun their journeys of faith at later stages of their live and I will affirm

as I always do that it is never too late to start that journey and that a journey started in adulthood is no less authentic than one started in childhood. But, for those of us who were born into church-going families, that journey began at a point when our cognitive and intellectual capacities were only just beginning to form. We started our journeys of faith long before we were capable of grasping theological doctrine or doing any kind of mature theological reflection. We believed because our most important role models believed and because we felt something stirring within ourselves that pointed us in the direction of faith.

I remember, as I grew older, feeling a sense of excitement and growth as I began to learn more and more about God. I was probably six or seven when I started actually listening to the pastor's sermons and started thinking about what I'd heard and trying to make sense of it. I remember reading the Bible and starting to connect up the dots on why things like Christmas and Easter were about way more than getting nice presents or chocolate bunnies. I imagine that many of you had the same experience. It was exciting to be Christian. It was exciting to be learning new things. It was exciting to feel your faith grow and mature.

But then, eventually, comes adulthood. And I think that most of us hit a point where we feel like we've pretty much got it all down. The exciting discoveries of youth become fixed truths. Over the years, many very good solid Presbyterians have confessed to me that they were feeling like their faith had gone stale. They were coming to church, maybe even attending Bible study and doing private devotions at home, but there was a sense of having learned all that they were capable of learning. What once thrilled them as children and teenagers had become stale as the decades rolled by. They were finding it way too easy to settle back and be comfortable with what they believed instead of seeking out new avenues of growth in faith.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus ran into lots of folks who had pretty much stalled out

in terms of faith development. They weren't bad people. They'd just run out of steam and were going through the motions without giving any of it much thought. And let's keep in mind that the religious structures of the time encouraged a static, rigid faith and not a faith that grew.

In today's John passage, Jesus has one of the more memorable encounters with a basically good person who had allowed the demands of life and the constraints of her religion to choke off any desire or initiative to dig deeper.

I think it's safe to say that the Samaritan woman did not go out to Jacob's well expecting to find the Jewish Messiah. In fact, I'm sure she didn't expect to find any Jew at all.

Although Jews and Samaritans shared much in common, there were centuries of bad blood between them. The fact that any conversation at all takes place is pretty startling all by itself. Jesus simply asks for water. The woman responds by saying Jews have no business asking Samaritans for anything.

Jesus, though, doesn't rise to the bait. Instead, He starts talking about "living water." Her response sounds like sarcastic banter, but she does stay engaged in the conversation. In a breathtakingly brief span of a few moments, Jesus leads her from contempt for an intrusive Jewish trespasser to an evangelistic fervor which spreads the Good News that the Savior of the world has come.

The Samaritan woman's light-speed jump across the theological spectrum has caught the attention of many theologians over the past two millennia. Centuries ago, an early Christian commentator known as "Ephraem the Syrian" outlined the sequence of events from the Samaritan woman's point of view:

. . . first she caught sight of a thirsty man, then a Jew, then a Rabbi, afterwards a prophet, last of all the Messiah. She tried to get the better of the thirsty man, she showed dislike of the Jew, she heckled the Rabbi, she was swept off her feet by the prophet, and she adored the Christ.

These kinds of paradigm shifts are hard . . . for everyone. The last thing we want to see is that man at the well who is going to force us out of our comfort zones, even if He is the Savior of the world. Our minds are made up. Please, please don't confuse us with the facts. It is so, so easy to let our faith development go stagnant.

Since we have academic studies on just about everything else, I guess it shouldn't be terribly surprising that we have one on faith development, and it's a pretty good one at that.

In the late 1970's, Professor James Fowler of the Harvard Divinity School published his findings on what he termed the "stages of faith." Fowler describes six successive stages of human faith development which ultimately will take us to a place of a truly mature faith that we can actively integrate into our lives.

Fowler, himself a gifted theologian, rejected the idea that faith is all about accepting theological doctrine. His own personal faith experience told him otherwise.

Fowler confessed that had come to regard his own theological education as deficient in two respects. First, it had completely disregarded the first stage of faith development that all of us go through, the time in a child's life when magic is real and the world is a mystical place. "I had to ignore the fact that the fact that some very powerful images of God and experiences of the holy occurred before I was five years of age."

Fowler's work reminds us that faith does not come about solely as a result of being told about God or of reading the Bible or hearing a sermon. If you have never been consciously aware of God's power at work in your life, then the words on the pages of the Bible, as glorious and eloquent as they may be, are unlikely to truly touch you on any meaningful level. A mature faith harnesses our minds, our bodies, our experiences, and our imaginations.

In describing the transitions between stages of faith, Fowler speaks of "clashes or

contradictions” that become apparent to us. Something no longer makes sense to us or some aspect of our faith is not nurturing us as it once did. We are forced to looking for something deeper or more meaningful. Often, it takes a crisis of faith to push us forward on the journey of faith.

The Samaritan woman wasn't in any sort of obvious crisis when she came to the well. But . . . the five previous marriages may suggest some strife and tragedy. The fact that she was living with a man to whom she was not married probably made her an outcast in her own community. Something isn't right with her life . . . and maybe that's why she is willing to go against her instincts as a Samaritan and at least talk to a Jewish man.

But the real crisis for the Samaritan woman is found in the person of Jesus Himself. Jesus knocks the foundations out from under her limited but comfortable world-view. Once she has seen Jesus and heard His words, she can never ever go back to her previous stagnant stage of faith.

Her response to this crisis is immediate. She leaves Jesus, but she is not running away from Jesus. She's going to take this crisis, this wonderful life-giving crisis, and share it with her neighbors. To re-organize Ephraem of Syria's account, the Samaritan woman has gone from seeker to proselyte to disciple to evangelist in a matter of minutes. It may look quick here on the written page, but we can be assured that it was not easy. It was messy and complicated. Just like all good journeys of faith should be.

In this Lenten season, we will re-live the crisis of the crucifixion and resurrection. If we are paying attention, our own world-view is about to be broken into tiny pieces. We will first be shocked by the reality that the Messiah will die. But, then, we will be confronted by the joyfully shocking reality that the Messiah will live again. And . . . still more shocking . . . that we, too,

can also die and then live again.

The man at the well is waiting for us and He waits with the living water. We each come to Him at a different stage of faith and we each bring with us our own personal crises. We may come to Him not knowing what we are looking for. We almost certainly come to Him with no idea of what lies ahead, what it is going to mean to grow into the next stage of faith.

But come we will. We can't help ourselves. That man at the well is just too compelling, and the living water He offers is too tantalizing.

So, keep a close eye out for your man at the well. He may show up any time and in any place. He will challenge you. He may leave you flustered. But, if you pay heed to His challenging words, He will also leave you transformed, refreshed and more than ready to press forward on your own journey of faith.