“#itshappening!“”

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John 4:5-42

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***5So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.***

***7A 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.) 9The 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.) 10Jesus 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.” 11The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” 13Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but 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.” 15The 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.”***

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

***27Just 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?” 28Then 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?” 30They left the city and were on their way to him.***

***31Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” 32But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” 33So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” 34Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 35Do 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. 36The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ 38I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”***

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

A few weeks ago I heard an interview with author, journalist, and historian Isabel Wilkerson, about her second book, Caste: The Origins of our Discontents. “The book describes [racism in the United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racism_in_the_United_States) as an aspect of a [caste](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste) system – a society-wide system of [social stratification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_stratification).” Among other things, Wilkerson defines eight features of caste systems in various societies. One of her ideas about why a system like this is able to be maintained is related to how we see or don’t see people who are unlike ourselves. One thing we do, she says, is make a judgment about somebody based on what we think their role should be. Each time we witness a person outside of the role we assume they have we are uncomfortable. Over time, enough of the people in power were uncomfortable so that laws like Jim Crow laws, and many other restrictions were put in place to force that role to be maintained. We see this historically and currently when we think about the segregation in schools, use of water fountains, red lining in neighborhoods, restricted employment opportunities that do exist and have existed throughout our American history.

To the degree society allows people to diverge from their normal social locations, a society will move forward. Societies ideals move rather slowly however, as there is often backlash whenever a change in the system is attempted. Wilkerson says that one example of that is “exemplified by the first lower-caste U.S. president being succeeded by one intent on reinforcing the system.”1

This discomfort with people acting in ways that are outside of their expected roles or outside of societies expected rules, is not unique to our society. There are universal aspects of human behavior underlying Wilkerson’s ideas. Societies described in biblical texts have the same issues.

The text we were presented with today is full of people doing things they wouldn’t be expected to be doing:

* A woman getting water in the heat of the day instead of the cooler morning, alone instead of with other women – being a widow she would not have women from other families to be with so she would have to go at another time of day, a time like noon for example.
* Jesus went out of his way to be in Samaria – a place where Jews were not welcome, and those laws keeping people in their place meant that Jews and Samaritans should not ever share any part of their lives. No touching, no talking, no sharing a meal, no contact.
* Jesus wasn’t supposed to be talking to a woman – the disciples noticed this right away.

There are other differences:

The woman at the well was uneducated, a widow, a “nobody” in her world, a learner. Jesus was tender with her as she engaged with Jesus’ statements. Not only was he talking to a woman, he was initiating the conversation, it was Jesus who was thirsty, and he let her know that he knew of her life and loved her anyway. She who was unfamiliar with usual society, the world of faith, the customs of Judaism, was able to understand that he was not only a prophet, her first guess, but could see that he was actually the Messiah that had been promised by the ancestors and fathers. So joyous was her belief, so startled by realizing that she was talking to the Lord, she dropped what she was doing, dropped her errands and left behind her water jar, and ran to tell her village.

She went from being a nobody to being the first witness to Jesus as the Christ. In the gospel of John, this woman who has remained unnamed for thousands of years, she is the first evangelist, the first person to bring others, bring men, to Jesus themselves. The men were also amazed and invited Jesus to stay with them. They no longer needed her first person account, because now they had their own experiences to share. Jesus stayed with them for a few days.

Jesus was breaking barriers, and not allowing the cultural norms to stop him from including all people in the promise of living water. Karoline Lewis, professor at Luther Seminary, says, “In this unexpected witness, this Samaritan village is the narrative fulfillment of 3:16, “For God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son…””2

Our Lenten journey is our way of accompanying Jesus on his way to the cross metaphorically, but also through Jesus’ own literal journey from Judea to Galilee. The first Sunday of Lent we heard about the gift of God for us, in us, that Jesus is, not just for us, but for the world. The second Sunday of Lent we met Nicodemus, an unlikely night time visitor to Jesus, scholar and teacher, yet unable to grasp the gift of being born of the spirit and the “eternal life” that Jesus was offering. “How can this be?” he kept asking. This Sunday we meet the woman at the well, not a scholar, not a teacher but a learner, who asks questions also and learns and is startled by the truth. Not only does she not ask “How can this be?” but she runs and tells other, “This *is*!” Next week our text will introduce us to yet another person who is even farther down on the societal scale.

Each week during Lent, Jesus collects people who are even more unlikely than the last, to be considered acceptable or normal according to the rules of the status quo. We can say that God loves us, “no matter who we are” because we see by Jesus’ actions that he goes out of his way to break a barrier, in this case religious and gender barriers, to get to anyone on the outside. Feeling on the outside, God will bring you in. Feeling part of the darkness, God will bring you light. Feeling low, God will bring you up.

The actions of the woman at the well are a beautiful display of the delight and amazement that come when we realize that we are in the presence of God’s love. Unlike at the transfiguration when the two disciples wanted to build three places for Jesus and Moses and Elijah, unlike the disciples as they are portrayed in other gospels, who want to dwell in the sparkle, the woman at the well finds joy in acting. In doing. She lets her experience with the holy, guide her actions, change her direction.

Last week we saw Nicodemus, a little stubborn because he knew things, had a hard time changing his beliefs, just like us at times, approach Jesus. Jesus taught him about eternal life. This week we meet the woman at the well, a nobody to anyone else, approached by Jesus and engaged in conversation that led to new beliefs, especially about herself. No longer a nobody, her life would change drastically. Jesus offered her living water.

You and I are seen in both Nicodemus and the woman at the well. Our deeply held beliefs, our implicit biases, our desire to remain the same, to stay in our own place, are challenged every time we encounter Christ. There are many ways in which we are called to challenge our own assumptions, enlarge our view of the way things could be. Whether it is trying to wrap our heads around and change our participation in systems that keep others in their place; or learning how to be an ally to trans folks, LGBTQ folks, stay engaged with people with mental illnesses, help immigrants and refugees navigate their way into their new lives in the US, trying hard to climb out of our own tunnels of despair perhaps, learning to be better stewards of our planet’s resources, discovering the barriers that we need to destroy in order to widen our perspective and our imaginations, finding our way to the beloved community, we are not alone in any of it.

We don’t need to wait for signs, like one might use the weather to gauge the seasons – (not that we can even do that anymore!) – because #itshappening! Jesus said to the disciples, “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. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life.”

Let’s look around. The holy is right here, waiting to startle us, waiting to catch our attention.

God is there, just waiting for us; waiting to help us; waiting to teach us; already loving us.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

1Wilkerson, Isabel, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste:_The_Origins_of_Our_Discontents>

<https://www.npr.org/2020/08/04/898574852/its-more-than-racism-isabel-wilkerson-explains-america-s-caste-system>

<https://www.npr.org/2020/08/10/900274938/caste-argues-its-most-violent-manifestation-is-in-treatment-of-black-americans>

2 Karoline M. Lewis, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2, pp.92-97.