
Going Through Samaria

John 4:3-30, 39-42

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 19, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

There's a question that I want to ask you this morning: Have you ever been to Samaria? Really, I'm serious. Samaria. I ask this question because I know no one really wants to go through Samaria. It's never made it on to HGTV and why would it? You know Samaria, right? It's not listed on the top ten places to visit in the world. No one is rushing to buy real estate in Samaria. There's not a visible wall on its border but perhaps an invisible one that no one would dare cross. It's on the other side of the religious tracks so we're warned that it can be dangerous over there. It's an undesirable location for raising a family. No one in their right mind would choose to go to Samaria.

It's not clear whether Jesus himself chose to go there but once he left Judea and started back to Galilee "he had to go through Samaria." Have you ever been to Samaria?

It's a little different over there and difference can be so quickly disparaged. Samaria— Religiously, ethnically, and when you throw in a Samaritan woman, gender-ly different. And not just a simple difference but a serious demonization of it where Samaria was deemed enemy territory. Off limits to the pristine, privileged, and pure elect of the religious clientele. Outcast and unclean people. Jesus had to go through Samaria and we may try to avoid it because those aren't our people and it's not safe over there, especially at night. If we ever had to drive through Samaria, we would drive as fast as possible through red lights with our doors locked and windows shut tight. No one wants to risk being contaminated in Samaria. It's almost as if one touch, even one glimpse, can give us the cooties and we'll never recover again. There are parts of Durham that are Samaria. Have you ever been to Samaria? If not, you're missing out.

When Jesus goes through Samaria, he comes to Sychar and discovers Jacob's well is there. And once he encounters the woman, she tells him, "the well is deep." Though we may try to skip around Samaria, skip around East Durham, East LA, and East Palo Alto, it's where the well is. It's not where you expect it or where you might want it but the well of water is in Samaria. You wouldn't know this if you've never been there. You would never know this unless you engaged Samaritans, the outcasts, the so-called alien folk, the *goy*. They may not have the right immigration papers or right education or right religion, but Jacob's well is right there in Samaria. Have you ever been to Samaria? If not, you're missing out because you can't say, "It is well with my soul" until you drink from the wells of Samaria, until you enter their territory and sit down by their well, just like Jesus did. It wasn't until he spoke with the Samaritan woman that he learned how deep the well was.

Until we engage with the citizens of Samaria, we will never know that their wells are deep. You have to go there to learn this and not just read about Samaria on the nightly news. If you go there and talk to the people, you might discover the deep wells of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. You might glean something new from the other, from a Samaritan of all people. You might actually learn that they, too, know God and through this encounter with difference you will discover how God moves through the other. You may come to recognize untapped gifts and potential and life in Samaria, hopefully never underestimating what is in their land or neighborhood, ever again. Their

wells run deep but if you never go there, the people will only be ‘the other’ who don’t belong to your group and perhaps only belong in prison, on the streets, in *that* neighborhood. Have you ever been to Samaria? I bet you’ll find your salvation there. If you’ve never been, you’re missing out.

Human beings live in Samaria, live in the shanty towns of Nairobi, Kenya, are locked away in the prison at Butner, find themselves sleeping at an Urban Ministries shelter in Durham, struggle to find consistent compassionate help in some of our VA hospitals. Human beings with human need just like us, just like Jesus, in Samaria. A Samaritan woman goes to the well to draw water and Jesus says to her, “Give me a drink.” In the Jewish worldview of that day, any engagement with a Samaritan could be a risk of contamination and here we have Jesus basically asking for contaminated water, as if we needed another Flint, Michigan situation. But Jesus wasn’t concerned about this or bad press. He didn’t go to Samaria as a patron, the doing good in the neighborhood savior. He came as one who also was thirsty on the same level as the Samaritan woman. Although he is the Son of God, the Messiah, he places himself on her level as a thirsty human being. He was humble enough to receive, and not just give, in Samaria. The one who can meet every need asserts his own need—“Give me a drink.” Have you ever been to Samaria?

You might actually find out that you have more things in common with Samaritans than you thought. The woman is surprised and says to Jesus, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” And just in case we don’t get what’s she’s saying, the narrator tells us, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” I bet that we don’t go to Samaria because we think there’s no common ground with “those people.” It’s like comparing the Blue Devils with the Tarheels or Eastern Carolina barbeque with Western Carolina barbeque. What’s there in common? There is common ground—we’re all Carolinians. There is common ground. Jesus and the Samaritan are both thirsty. Both have a human need. You’ll find that you share a common humanity with those in Samaria but to come to know this, you have go through Samaria. When Jesus crosses religious, ethnic, and gender borders, he crosses the lines of purity and he risks contamination and ostracization in order to heal old divisions. But you have to go through Samaria for genuine healing to happen, to realize that those on the other side or the underside are really on the same side as us, as human beings. We are all thirsty. We are all hungry. We are all in need. We all desire to draw from a well that is deep. And the breaking biblical news is—it’s all in Samaria. Have you ever been there?

Samaria is where the well is deep and common ground can be found. You don’t want to miss going through Samaria because if you do, you’ll miss the unveiling of the truth of who you are. Samaria is a place where you can come to know and be known for who you truly are. This happens when you encounter the other. I’m sure it’s possible, but it’s hard to hide your true self in Samaria. There are so many social and religious strikes against Samaritans already that they don’t necessarily need to hide behind secret doors any longer. What is there to lose? The Samaritan woman reveals a triple whammy against her in being a woman, a Samaritan, and a possible polygamist. She had five husbands and another man for sidekick tricks, not quite reaching Elizabeth Taylor’s standard. She claims, “I have no husband” and maybe she was in denial about her past and present, but in the sight of Jesus in Samaria, the truth is revealed. And perhaps it’s the truth of why she came to the well in the first place because when the disciples show up, she leaves her water jar and goes back to the city and tells people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.” This woman didn’t really need water; her real need was a thirst for love and yearning to be understood and known by someone and Jesus, in Samaria, did exactly that. He knew her behind the barricaded doors of her life. She wanted to be known and be transparent, finally, no longer suffocated by her secrets. Being known by Jesus freed her into mission and service to spread the news about how

Jesus told her everything she had done. She could be her true self and not pretend anymore. See what you're missing out on when you avoid Samaria.

To be known and loved without condemnation. The woman comes to know one who, according to a biblical commentator, offers "full acceptance despite full knowledge" (Gerard Sloyan). I think we all need to find refuge and renewal in Samaria. It's not that scary or dangerous on the other side of the tracks. There may be where you find your freedom in Christ who will tell you everything you have ever done and still love, accept, and cherish you. No more attempts to be anyone else, just ourselves— parched, thirsty, loved sinners. Have you ever been to Samaria? If not, you're missing out, even missing the presence of Jesus.

Because Jesus is there in Samaria. If you dive deeper into the wells of Samaria, you will eventually find the wellspring of life there. In Samaria, you will find your salvation because you will find Jesus among the weary, worn, and the perceived wild. He is there across the train tracks! He had to go through Samaria to reveal our own thirst for him. The wells are deep in Samaria but even deeper than that is the well that will never run dry, and we'll never be thirsty again. Jesus offers eternal living water in Samaria, like a running spring or stream that is never stagnant, but ever flowing, creating, healing, enlivening, nourishing, gushing with the life of God wherever we go. Samaria reveals that the Spirit is not just in the wind but in the waters of our baptism too and the water of the wine as well.

Jesus is an equal opportunity God—not just wind but water. Not just Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, not just a royal official's son, but also a Samaritan woman. Jesus won't be boxed into our paradigms of who is acceptable to touch or engage. He's not afraid to go to Samaria. He isn't limited to certain privileged spaces or people—not contained in Jerusalem or on that mountain, Mount Gerizim. Jesus tears apart our categories of acceptance and reveals a wide tent of love. He tears down walls in the Spirit for God is spirit so there are no silos of God's presence.

You will find Jesus in Samaria so if you avoid Samaria, you may be avoiding Jesus. I hope you go there sometime and discover as the Samaritans said, that he's "the savior of the world," the whole world, including Samaria. Have you ever been to Samaria?

Christ is calling from there. "All you who are thirsty, come to the water" (Is. 55:1). All you who are hungry, come to the table. Come, even when it means you have to go through Samaria.