

## In Broad Daylight

Sermon 11 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 24, 2019

Third Sunday Lent

Isaiah 55:1-3,6 | John 4: 5-42

I once heard a story about a preacher who got up after the choir sang a beautiful anthem and said... “well, I don’t have anything better than that. ...so um, go in peace. Amen”

It’s times like this that I am tempted to do the same thing.

In the book we’re reading for Lent, Brené Brown states: “Art has the power to render sorrow beautiful, make loneliness a shared experience, and transform despair into hope. ... Music, like all art, gives pain and our most wrenching emotions voice, language, and form, so it can be recognized and shared.”<sup>1</sup>

Things that we cannot and will not talk about in the light of day, we often hear musicians singing about in dark saloons and music halls. There’s just nothing like the resonance we feel when an artist can put our inmost thoughts, the things we cannot summon the courage to say, and offer them right back to us...

I like to listen to Chris Stapleton singing the words to “Fire Away” at the end of a long week at work. His words:

Honey load up your questions  
And pick up your sticks and your stones  
And pretend I’m a shelter for heartaches  
That don’t have a home.  
Choose the words that cut like razor  
And all that I’ll say is, Fire Away.

There’s something about that steel guitar, the 6/8 time, and the raspy voice singing exactly what my soul needs at the end of the week. “Why not world, give tell me one more thing I did wrong. Come on... I’m right here. Lay it on me.” It’s as if the words and the music were written exactly about me and for me in those moments.

I’m prone to sing along loudly in my car while it’s still parked in the dark parking lot after 5pm, or when I’m just sitting in the driveway after the late meeting, wanting to belt out one more verse before I need to go inside with a smile to greet my daughter who has been anxiously awaiting “happy mommy” to do bedtime.

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<sup>1</sup> Brené Brown. *Braving the Wilderness*. 44.

In the light of the household kitchen where my daughter awaits, there isn't always room for my pain. But in the dark car, where I sit alone, I'm free to belt out the stress and pain of the workweek.

Light has a way of exposing that which we want to keep hidden; whereas those vulnerabilities are more easily concealed under the cover of night.

Today's Gospel reading comes from John Chapter 4. In it we encounter an unnamed Samaritan woman who is fetching water at Jacob's well in broad daylight - around noon according to the Gospel. In first century when John's Gospel was written, women didn't just walk around unaccompanied. Nor did they fetch water at mid-day. So right off the bat, there would have been some questions about *why* she was at the well at this time.

To be fair, the original audience might also be wondering why Jesus was at Jacob's well at noon. A quick glance at a map of the ancient Near East would reveal that Samaria is not necessarily on the way from Judea to Galilee. It's not directly on the way if you take the western route. Even still, most Galilean Jews would have crossed over the Jordan River and traveled up the east side of the river to avoid coming into contact with Samaritans on the way. The divisions between Galilean Jews and Samaritans was so intense that it required ritual for any Galilean who had come into contact with a Samaritan before one could be admitted back into the Temple. So *why* did Jesus need to go this way?

The woman had a lot of things working against her in this story. Not only was she a woman *and* a Samaritan, but we will also learn that she has been married several times, a major source of embarrassment, failure, and shame. Many scholars believe that her marital history is probably the reason she went to fetch water in the hottest part of the day. She probably knew that at midday, she wouldn't risk an encounter with anyone she knew, anyone who knew her or knew her history.

For a woman to be married five times in the first century probably meant that she was either widowed several times over – which would have been interpreted as some sort of curse on her family, or punishment for a sin in their past. Or it could mean that she was divorced four times over for trivial reasons, most likely that she was barren. All of these circumstances would have been painful beyond belief. And reliving them under the public gaze of others she may encounter at the well would have forced her to relive her most painful experiences over and over again.

Brené Brown talks about this kind of loneliness, isolation, and shame in *Braving the Wilderness*. She describes it as “high lonesome,” and it is part of the modern-day wilderness that is the world we live in. Ours is a world similar to the one we find in John Chapter 4 where people can be so divided, sorted, and cut off from one another that they shouldn't even be speaking to one another. The woman who dominates the reading today has been sorted out of her social circles, outcast from other Samaritans and destined to fetch water alone before returning home to a man who is not her husband. Scholars

presume that this man, the one she lives with, was likely the brother of her deceased husband. The two may be living together as a Levirate marriage because it was the law for a man to marry the widow of his brother. While history may like to paint this woman as a harlot, the truth is that she was likely a victim of circumstance trapped in a world that required her to face the grief of death or the shame of barrenness every day of her life. Even within her Samaritan circles, she was outcast.

She could be surrounded by people and yet be utterly alone. Her life was high lonesome, wilderness.

The conflict between Jews and Samaritans further marginalized her in the encounter with Jesus and the other Galilean Jews with whom he travelled. Samaritans were ethnically and politically “other” from Galileans. The history dated back nearly 800 years by the time Jesus strolled into town. Samaria was originally the Northern Kingdom, also known as Israel. The tribes who lived in it were descendants of Jacob, who wrestled with God. And for them, the site of Jacob’s well was holy ground. In 722 BCE the Northern Kingdom was overtaken by the Assyrian Empire which quickly brought in people to intermingle with the natives and over time, change the ethnic makeup of the region. Samaritans emerged as the new people group. They represented a people who were half Israelite and half Assyrian. A new ethnic group was born which held onto religious practices that were both Assyrian and Israeli. For this reason, Galileans considered them impure and unworthy of worship in Jerusalem.

Eventually, of course, the southern kingdom of Judah would also be overtaken by the Babylonian empire. The same kind of people-mixing would happen but the idea that Samaritans were less holy, less pure, less human than Judeans would never go away.

So, when Jesus says that he had to go to Samaria that day, you can imagine the shock his early disciples may have felt.

This is wilderness.

The collision of these two individuals is narrative wilderness right here in the Gospel of John. This encounter should have never happened in the ancient world and the boundaries crossed continue to build. “We have a man speaking to a woman, a rabbi speaking to a woman, a Jew speaking with a Samaritan, a Jewish Rabbi speaking to a Samaritan,” and all the while, they are alone.<sup>2</sup>

Alone, in broad daylight Jesus, the Galilean Jew and the unnamed woman of Samaria strike a match that meets both of their needs. Jesus needs water but has no bucket. His human thirst motivates him to ask her for what she has to offer.

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline M. Lewis. *Fortress Press Preaching Commentaries: John*. p 56

The woman needs to be seen, for who she is, not for what people say and think about her. She needs her story and her identity to be valued and not used as a means for marginalization.

Too often, our needs and our sources of pain and shame cause us to retract, to avoid the light, to hide away in our homes or in spaces where we can pretend like we have it all together. How much more is this true when we are around people we don't really like? Or people who we vehemently disagree with on everything that matters?

When the marriage begins to fall apart, couples stop coming to church. It's too hard to talk about what's really going on.

When the addiction returns we isolate ourselves so we don't have to confess to our inability to keep things under control.

When the mistake from our past becomes public information, we barricade ourselves inside of our homes, because the words "I'm sorry" are not enough to erase the damage that we have done and it feels like there's no coming back.

When our politician doesn't win the election, we cancel family dinners or establish boundaries around what is and isn't permitted in the conversation.

Sooner or later we have to realize that when we section off our lives, our relationships, our missteps, and our convictions, we can no longer be a part of a community that requires us to be our whole selves.

In efforts to protect ourselves from the potential pain that could be inflicted upon us from those holding differing opinions, we have created false realities within which we seek to live our whole lives. We may be avoiding the pain that others may bring, but we are also avoiding the beauty of a life shared with others in community.

Maybe when Jesus was planning his route back to Galilee he knew he had to go through Samaria not because it was the most direct path; maybe he knew that the kingdom that he was meant to build *needed* Samaritans too. And not just any Samaritan, but the woman, the one who bore the shame of her past and had to wear it around like clothing in broad daylight.

I wonder if the church could be like the wilderness of the noon-day sun? I wonder if we could create a gathering place where all were truly welcome to come as they are... not dressed in their finest, not covering up their scars, not apologizing for their shortcomings, not afraid to ask their questions, not ashamed or embarrassed by their ideas... simply welcome and free and valued for who they are and what they have to offer... can we be that kind of church? Are we that kind of church?

Sometimes people are scared of the daylight. The sun gets a bad reputation. It can cause us to overheat, it can give us sunburns, it can even cause skin cancer. But the sun also has healing powers. Exposure to sunlight can help with cholesterol, it can kill certain bad bacteria, it can lower blood pressure, and it can cure certain kinds of depression.<sup>3</sup> We may be scared of the light, but sometimes exposure to it can be good for our bodies and our souls.

In the same way, being a community of a broad daylight faith can feel like wilderness. It can be scary because it means that when we show up, we cannot hide who we are. Instead, we wear our stories, our pain, and our shame right out there with our joys our talents, and our biggest gifts. And we keep showing up for one another in this way offering our whole selves and affirming one another with that same spirit of grace we find in Jesus who turns our thirst into living water and calls us to go and do the same wherever we go.

Along the way, and in the broad daylight, we may just find ourselves willing to join in singing that same song that sent us down this path:

Lord I give you all I can today,  
These scattered ashes that are hid away,  
I lay it all at your feet.

And in our song, we might just find that even our ashes are good enough for us to join in the fellowship of God's kingdom.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-5999/10-Healing-Benefits-of-the-Sun.html>