

Lent 3A
Peace, Seattle
March 19, 2017
John 4:3-42

FROM LONG BAG TO LIVING WATER

Backstory. We all have one. And the longer we live the more complicated it becomes...and heavy. Among its features—shame-inducing experiences and the times when we’ve fallen short of the expectations of others. Poet Robert Bly calls it “the long bag we drag behind us.”

When we were 1 or 2 years old, he writes, we had a 360-degree personality with energy radiating out from all parts of our body and psyche. But one day we noticed that our parents didn’t like certain parts of that ball. They said things like: “Can’t you be still?” Or “It isn’t nice to try and kill your brother.”

Behind us we have an invisible bag, and the parts of us our parents don’t like, we...put in the bag. By the time we go to school our bag is quite large. Then our teachers have their say: “Good children don’t get angry over such little things.” So we take our anger and put it in the bag.

We spend our life [up to age] twenty deciding what parts of ourself to put into the bag, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to get them out again.¹

The stories of Scripture all have a backstory.

Sometimes it’s revealed through journeys made over generations—think of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob; or Egyptian captivity and the exodus and wilderness wanderings under Moses.

Sometimes a backstory comes with elaborate details and other times we only get tantalizing hints of what it might be. And in some cases the stories of Scripture become themes and archetypes to which succeeding generations return again and again.

For example, the role of “woman unable (at first) to bear children” is first debuted by Sarah in Genesis, and then echoed in the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel; and reprised again in Luke’s story of elderly Elizabeth, the unlikely elderly mother of John the Baptist.

Here’s another example: encounters between men and women at wells carry certain connotations for people of the Bible. It’s where Jacob met his Rachel, Isaac met his Rebekah, and Moses met his Zipporah. And each time it played out something like this:

- Man comes to well
- Man meets woman
- Man asks for drink
- Conversation follows
- Woman runs home to tell her people
- They return and approve the man
- Man and woman get married.

You get the picture. In writing his gospel, John takes full advantage of these allusions to previous story lines and archetypes in the history of the people of God.

Today, we meet a woman who encounters Jesus at a well and ends up having the longest recorded conversation with him of any person in any of the gospels.

¹ Robert Bly. *The Long Bad We Drag Behind Us*, from *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*. pp.17-18

What's her backstory? What things has she been stuffing into that long bag she drags around behind her?

Well, **she is a WOMAN**, and in a culture where legal, economic, and political power belonged exclusively to males, **THAT** goes in the bag.

She is a Samaritan, a fact that evokes the centuries-long feud between religiously “pure” Israel and its “syncretist” neighbors to the north. **THAT, TOO**, goes in the bag.

And from what the dialog reveals, she has also, apparently, been **a serial monogamist**.
When Jesus tells her:

GO CALL YOUR HUSBAND, she retorts: I HAVE NO HUSBAND.

And Jesus comes back: YOU'RE RIGHT, BECAUSE THE TRUTH IS YOU'VE HAD FIVE HUSBANDS, AND THE MAN YOU'RE WITH NOW IS NOT YOUR HUSBAND.

The Samaritan woman is a person for whom marriage has been riddled with failure. And EACH ONE of those failed relationships **goes in the bag**.

But what exactly is being said about her here?

Many past and current preachers and commentators have suggested that she was a prostitute, or that she'd been “sleeping around”; that she had a shady past and even now had a live-in boyfriend.

But nothing in the passage makes this the obvious interpretation.

Neither John as narrator nor Jesus as central character supply that information.

Jesus doesn't tell her to repent—in fact the topic of sin doesn't come up at all.²

The truth is, she could have been widowed five times—can you imagine the grief? Or been divorced by her husbands (actions men ALONE were free to initiate). And divorce and abandonment amounted to much the same thing. Going through that hell five times would have been heartbreaking, but not impossible.

What reason could account for it? Her inability to provide her husband with an heir, for one. All of this gets stuffed in the long bag.

As far as her current status goes, she could be living with someone on whom she was forced to depend through no fault and little choice of her own. There are any number of ways we can imagine this woman's story as being tragic rather than scandalous, yet many have assumed the latter.

The difficulty with the scandal-based approach, as David Lose points out, is that it doesn't hold up with the rest of the story.³

Immediately after Jesus describes her past, the woman calls him “a prophet” and asks him where one ought to worship. If we believe the worst about her, this is nothing more than a clumsy attempt to change the topic. But if we can imagine another scenario, things look different.

“Seeing” in John, is all-important. “To see” is often connected with belief. When the woman says, “I see you are a prophet,” she's making a confession of faith. Why? Because Jesus has “seen” her!

² See David Lose, *Misogyny, Moralism and the Woman at the Well*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/misogyny-moralism-and-the_b_836753.html?view=print
Much of the analysis here comes from his article.

³ Ibid. Much of the following paragraphs excerpted from Lose's post, with some edits and additions (e.g. “long bag” references).

He's seen her plight; he's peered into the long bag she drags behind her. He knows her grief, her dependence; that the life she's ended up with doesn't at all resemble what she'd hoped for.

In this encounter, Jesus gives her something priceless: He sees her – she exists for him, has worth, value, significance. And all of this is treatment to which she is unaccustomed.

So when he speaks of her past both knowingly and compassionately, she realizes she is in the presence of a prophet—one whom she now dares to engage even further.

Risking the central question that has divided Samaritans like her and Jews like Jesus for centuries, she cuts to the chase:

OUR ANCESTORS WORSHIPED ON THIS MOUNTAIN, BUT YOU SAY THAT THE PLACE WHERE PEOPLE MUST WORSHIP IS IN JERUSALEM.

It's another way of asking: WHERE IS GOD?

In his response Jesus takes the conversation deeper still:

THE HOUR IS COMING AND IS NOW HERE, WHEN THE TRUE WORSHIPERS WILL WORSHIP THE FATHER IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH.

I KNOW MESSIAH IS COMING, she responds. And Jesus tells her: **I AM HE.**

It's right then, after Jesus' answer, that the woman leaves her water jar – her rejection, her marginalization; leaves her long bag – behind her, and she goes to tell her neighbors about him.⁴

At its core, this story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria is a story of the transforming and boundary crashing power of love and the capacity to receive and to live into a new identity.

Sisters and brothers, the transforming power of love, the capacity to receive a new identity, is a gift Jesus offers you and me today.

He stands ever ready with living waters to quench our thirst to belong and to belong.

Through the grace of baptism and the gifts of this Table he abides with us still—creating clean hearts and fashioning us into a community where each one of us—whatever our backstory—can find acceptance and welcome and a love that abides.

Like the neighbors of the Samaritan woman who listened to her testimony, we can now say:
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.

Amen.

⁴ Ibid.