

*Living Water, let your word fill our hearts as a spring fills a pool, and help us see the ways you would have us bring life to your world. Amen.*

Throughout Scripture two types of women show up again and again.

The first is the barren woman, who appears unable to bear children. Often this woman has lost standing in society because – in the patriarchal biblical society – she has not borne a son for her husband.

The second is the foreigner, who falls outside the covenant God has made with the Hebrew people, but who ends up being the very person to carry on the promise of God for the people.

The barren woman is first introduced with Sarah, who laughs when God tells Abraham that she will bear him a son sometime after the age of 75. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, are two other examples of God working through a human in this uniquely feminine way.

In a culture that exalted the ability to bear children, particularly sons, a woman who did not do so was considered a second-class citizen... even though modern science now teaches us that such an ability actually had very little to do with the woman's biology.

God took women who struggled with infertility, and not only gave them children, but made their children into powerful people who would go on to change the world.

The foreign woman arguably also shows up first in Sarah – she and Abraham received God's promise, and traveled to the Promised Land, from a region that is now in Iraq.

Throughout the Biblical narrative, the covenant is kept through foreign women such as Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Their wisdom and quiet rebellion allowed for the Messiah to finally come to earth.

Although they had not been raised to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, these women ensured that the people who did worship God would thrive. And so they were adopted into the covenantal promises that God had made with the people.

While considering both of these female biblical archetypes, we'll need to keep one important cultural reality in mind.

Women weren't individuals in the ancient world. Women were considered property. They didn't have any rights, they couldn't inherit property, and they weren't even considered witnesses in a court of law.

<http://www.bible-history.com/court-of-women/women.html>

A woman needed a man to protect her and provide for her – a father, a husband, or a son. If she was lucky, a brother or other relative might fill this role if she found herself on her

own. But women were extremely vulnerable in the biblical world, where they were not considered to be full persons.

The unnamed Samaritan woman in today's Gospel reading fits the mold of both archetypes: the barren woman who bears fruit, and the foreign woman who brings salvation.

This woman has been married five times.

What would cause five consecutive men to leave a woman? In the ancient world, the most logical example is infertility. If the woman could not produce an heir, the man would cast her aside for another wife, who could have a son.

If the woman had borne a son, she wouldn't have needed to seek safe harbor with another husband after the first – or fourth – one passed away. The woman couldn't inherit property, but the son could, and if he was too young to manage the estate, she could do so until he was old enough.

No, this woman was almost certainly childless – or at least son-less.

What about the man she's with now, who is not her husband?

Well, my guess – and it *is* a guess, but an educated one, based on quite a bit of research – I imagine that this woman was divorced by her first four husbands because she could not produce a son. Then she got married for the fifth time, and by this point the pickings were pretty slim on men who would give her a chance. Her last husband may have been old, or ill, or had something else going on that made him a less desirable husband to other women.

Then husband number five dies. Without a son. According to an ancient law, the brother of the deceased man can take the widow as his own wife, so that she can bear a son in her dead husband's name. Then that son can inherit the estate and carry on the family line of the man who died.

But think about it. If you were the brother, would you want to marry this woman? Maybe you're engaged to someone else, or your children are grown and you really don't want to raise another child right now. Perhaps the brother was kind enough to take the woman in, but it seems he didn't marry her, and didn't provide any kind of support for her except for food and lodging.

You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.

There are many possible explanations for this woman's situation. My guess may not be right. But please hear that there is absolutely nothing in this story to indicate that the woman was unfaithful to her husbands, that she was promiscuous, or that she was in any way at fault for her current condition.

Jesus doesn't judge her, he simply states the facts. This woman has a checkered past, one that many women would be ashamed of, even if it wasn't their fault.

This brings us to the second biblical archetype, the foreign woman who brings salvation to the people of Israel.

Samaritans, we are told, did not hold things in common with Jews. The history is a little more complicated than that. Basically, several hundred years earlier there had been a civil war that separated the northern kingdom of Israel from the southern kingdom of Judah. The Jews, or Judeans, were the ones who continued to occupy the southern territory.

The northerners were eventually conquered by the Assyrians, who took many Israelites into captivity, never to be seen again. In their place, some Assyrians were sent into the region to make it a profitable place for the empire. The territory of Israel was renamed Samaria.

Over the course of hundreds of years, and with travel to Jerusalem in the south impossible because of political divisions, the native Samaritans intermarried with the Assyrians, and found alternative places to worship.

These were their two deadly sins, according to the Judeans, who maintained that intermarriage was wrong and that Jerusalem was the only proper place to worship God.

So, according to Judean culture at the time of Jesus, this woman was not only a foreigner, but she had also betrayed God and her people simply by existing.

But the biblical precedent for a foreigner bearing God's word is quite strong. Today Jesus meets a woman who evokes images of Sarah and Rahab, Ruth and Elizabeth.

And he listens to her. He learns what it's like to be a Samaritan, a woman who has been through some rough times in her life.

One performance of this story that I've seen, from the woman's point of view, repeats the line, "To be known is to be loved and to be loved is to be known."

<https://youtu.be/Q49Bbfglbto>

Jesus sees and loves and knows this woman, in the best of all possible ways.

Have you ever met someone who loves you exactly for who you are, no questions asked, no conditions, no qualifications?

The closest most of us can imagine is the love of a parent for a child. There must be a heck of a lot of love and non-judgment going on in a healthy parent-child relationship... otherwise blow-out diapers would never be changed, and blow-up adolescent arguments would never be reconciled.

The love of Jesus is even deeper and less judgmental than that of a parent for a child.

And this love, that the unnamed Samaritan woman receives from Jesus, is able to change the world.

She is the culmination of these two biblical images of woman. She does not have her own biological children, but ends up with countless spiritual children. She meets God as someone outside the covenant, but is converted and brings a message of salvation to the people.

This woman is a prophet. She unashamedly proclaims the words of Jesus to her entire community, and many believed because of her testimony.

Today's story from John 4 couldn't be more different from last week's in John 3.

Listen to the first two verses of that passage:

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."*

In chapter three, the character who Jesus meets is named, he is powerful, and he has standing in the community. He is a leader in the faith, who seeks Jesus out, and professes to know who Jesus is.

And yet he comes to Jesus by night, under the cover of darkness. It's almost as if he's ashamed of his desire to learn from Jesus – as if he fears that his reputation will be in jeopardy if other people know that he's been to see this Rabbi.

In today's lesson from John 4, by contrast, the character Jesus meets remains unnamed. She has no power, no standing in society, and is either divorced or widowed five times over. According to Jewish law, she doesn't have any faith to speak of, and she certainly doesn't know who Jesus is at the beginning of their interaction. This woman meets Jesus in broad daylight, about noon, a time of the day when anyone could have walked past and seen their meeting – which, for the record, broke countless written and unwritten social conventions!

Jesus is able to meet both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman in the ways in which they were most comfortable. But the Samaritan woman surprises us by following through to the point where her entire hometown is converted into followers of Jesus within a few days.

Here is the really good news in the Gospel story today. This woman whose womb is barren is still able to bear fruit that will last much longer than any genealogical line. This woman who lives outside of the promise of God for the people is able to bring salvation to a larger group of people than anyone else we know of in the Bible, aside from possibly Peter.

This woman was a prophet, and she is a model for us.

We also can proclaim the good news of God's love to the world

Whether or not we believe we're worthy, whether or not we have a past that burdens us, whether or not society values our contributions – the Samaritan woman provides an example for us.

We are good enough.

We are valuable.

We have the skills that are necessary.

And we can proclaim God's love for the world, even in the unlikeliest of circumstances.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.