

"NOT FROM AROUND HERE"

"Sir, I see that you are a prophet."

"You're not from around here, are you?"

I've been asked this question numerous times over the past three years. It's usually asked when I meet a person for the first time, and after a few minutes of conversation they realize that my accent isn't a local one. When I answer that no, I am not from around here, but in fact am from New Jersey, it usually leads to more questions, including how did I end up in Stratford? Depending on the situation, I can give either the short or the long answer; in either case, I was not someone these persons were expecting to meet here in southwestern Ontario.

These experiences have given me a new appreciation of the Samaritan woman's reaction when she encounters Jesus at Jacob's Well in the city of Sychar. Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of John enters a new stage as he leaves his homeland and enters a territory that his fellow Jews considered a place of outsiders and enemies: Samaria. The enmity between Jews and Samaritans can be traced to the Assyrian occupation of the Northern Kingdom in 721 BC, but the most intense rivalry began @200 BC in a dispute about the correct location where the people of God should worship, which is referenced in 4:20 (*"Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."*). The Samaritans built a shrine on Mt. Gerizim and claimed that this shrine, not the Jerusalem Temple, was the proper place of worship. The shrine at Mt. Gerizim was destroyed by Jewish troops in 128 BC, but the schism continued: *"Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans."* (4:9).

At the beginning of the story, the Evangelist reports that Jesus *"had to go through Samaria."* (4:4). While this may be a geographical reference, since Samaria was on the route between Judea and Galilee, in John's Gospel *"had to"* (*edei*) is usually associated with God's plan (*"We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work."* – 9:4). In other words, it is not by accident that Jesus crosses over into Samaria, but is a part of God's plan that *"to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."* (1:12-13). Jesus enters Sychar, a Samaritan city of historical significance as it was *"near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph"* (*"The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, where buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph."* – Joshua 24:32).

Sitting by the well to rest after his arduous journey, Jesus probably does not expect to encounter anyone coming to draw water in the noontime heat; water was usually drawn in the cooler early morning or late evening hours. But *"a Samaritan woman came to draw water,"* for reasons that are not explained. There is nothing to indicate that she comes at noon to avoid her neighbors because she is ashamed of something in her past, or that she is forced to carry heavy water jars in the scorching heat because she is an outcast from Samaritan society. When she arrives at the well, she is startled to find another person there; when Jesus speaks to her, she is even more surprised not only by his request to *"give me a drink"* (4:7), but because a man with a Galilean accent is speaking to a Samaritan woman at a time when not only did Jews and Samaritans have no contact, but women and men generally kept a safe distance from each other (as is seen by the disciples' reaction when he returned and *"were astonished that he was speaking with a woman"* (4:27). The Samaritan woman does not know who Jesus is; all she knows at this point is that *"you're not from around here, are you?"*

Jesus' request for water recalls the story of Elijah and the widow of Sidon, another situation in which a Jew crosses the border and encounters a person outside of the people of Israel:

- "When [Elijah] came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, 'Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.' As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.'" – 1 Kings 17:10-11.

The Samaritan woman responds with understandable amazement: *"How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"* (4:9) – surprised that a man with an obvious Jewish accent would be speaking to a person who was both a Samaritan and a woman. But Jesus continues to speak with her, revealing more about his identity than his accent might reveal: *"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."* (4:10). If she could recognize the identity of the person with whom she speaks, a dramatic role reversal will take place: the woman would be the one who requests "living water," which can mean both fresh, running water (as opposed to the still water of a well or cistern) and "live-giving water." The woman is at first confused by Jesus' offer; not only does he have no bucket with which to draw water, but does he believe himself to be *"greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"* (4:12). Jesus responds by focusing on the effect of the two waters on thirst: *"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty."* (4:13-14), a contrast that recalls the words of the prophet Isaiah:

- "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." – Isaiah 55:1-2.

Those who drink from Jesus' water will never thirst because *"the water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."* (4:13). Although the woman at the point recognizes neither Jesus' true identity nor the fullness of his gifts, she is willing to receive what she thinks he is offering and hence to acknowledge her need of him: *"Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."* (4:15).

Jesus moves the conversation in a new direction when he directs the woman to *"go, call your husband, and come back."* (4:16). The exchange that follows has traditionally been interpreted as evidence of the woman's immorality, as *"you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband."* (4:18). She may have been trapped in the custom of "levirate marriage," in which a childless woman is married to her deceased husband's brother in order to produce an heir yet is not always technically considered the brother's wife:

- "When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name many not be blotted out of Israel." – Deuteronomy 25:5-6.

Far from being a woman of ill-repute who has been ostracized from respectable society, the Samaritan woman's life may have been a tragic tale in which five of her husbands have died, and the last male in the family has refused to marry her. *"She very easily could have been widowed or have been abandoned or divorced. Five times would be heartbreaking, but not impossible ... there are any number of ways, in fact, that one might imagine this woman's story as tragic rather than scandalous."* (David Lose).

Jesus' insight into her words and life lead her to declare that *"sir, I see that you are a prophet"* (4:19), recalling the response of Nathaniel when he meets Jesus early in the Fourth Gospel (*"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"* – 1:49). Believing at this point that Jesus is merely a prophet, she asks him about the proper place of worship, anticipating that he will speak an authoritative word on the subject. But Jesus directs her attention away from the present to the future, declaring that *"the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem"* (4:21); "the hour is coming" referring to the time of eschatological fulfillment (*"Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."* – 5:25). Jesus' next statement – *"You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."* (4:22) – is not merely another indication of the animosity between Jesus' people and those of the Samaritan woman, but an insight into the differences in the faith of the two peoples. The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) as Scripture, and so from the Jewish perspective they had an incomplete picture of God as is revealed in the entire Hebrew Bible. The fact that *"salvation is from the Jews"* is rooted in God's covenant with Abraham, which states that *"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* (Genesis 12:3). By rejecting God's chosen people (of which Jesus is one), the Samaritans risk rejecting God's offer of salvation.

Jesus returns to the dispute about the true place to worship God when he declares that *"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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."* (4:23-24). True worship will no longer be defined by place, for God is not bound to any one place or people, and those who worship God will share in this spirit. In response, the woman shares a belief that Samaritans shared with Jews: *"I know Messiah is coming."* (4:25). For the Samaritans, the Messiah was *Taheb*, "the one who returns," a teacher *"who will proclaim all things to us."* It is at this point that Jesus reveals his true identity to the woman: *"I am he, the one who is speaking to you."* (4:26). Jesus' "I am" (*ego eimi*) is an absolute statement of his identity that is used throughout John's Gospel, confirming that he is the one who *"in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* (1:1):

- *"It is I; do not be afraid."* – 6:20.
- *"I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he."* – 8:24.
- *"I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he."* – 13:19.
- *"When Jesus said to them, 'I am he,' they stepped back and fell to the ground."* – 18:6.

"Jesus fulfills the Samaritan woman's messianic expectations at the same time as he transcends them." (Gail O'Day).

Up to this point in the story, the disciples have not been in the picture (*"His disciples had gone to the city to buy food."* – 4:8). When they return and see Jesus speaking with the Samaritan woman, they are shocked that he would violate social conventions, but keep their questions to themselves. It is the woman who now becomes the central actor in the story; she leaves her water jar behind, goes into town and bears witness to what she has heard. She invites her fellow townspeople to *"come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"* (4:29). She offers an invitation for others to participate in the life of faith, offering her own experience as the basis for her witness as she invites others to experience Jesus for themselves. Like John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman is a witness who brings people to faith in Jesus (*"I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."* – 1:26-27). The result of her testimony is that *"many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.'"* (4:39). They asked Jesus to *"stay with them,"* "stay" meaning to enter into relationship with Jesus (*"Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you*

abide in me.” – 15:4). Many more persons come to faith in Jesus as a result of this stay, and those who believe acknowledge that their own encounter with Jesus supplants the woman’s word: *“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.”* (4:42). Salvation may be “from the Jews,” but it is not limited to the Jews.

- “This is the model of witness and faith in the Fourth Gospel: the witness that leads to Jesus is replaced by one’s own experience of Jesus.” – Gail O’Day.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

Jesus may have spoken to the Samaritan woman in his native accent, but the word he shares with her is for everyone. Jesus is, as the Samaritans proclaim, *“the Savior of the world,”* and therefore it is not by accident that he is in Samaria on this day. Jesus *“had to go through Samaria”* just as his Word needed to be proclaimed to all people, that *“repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”* (Luke 24:47). It is necessary for Jesus to break social conventions and barriers in entering into Samaria and speaking with a woman, because *“there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28). Even borders and barriers that separated and distinguished peoples for centuries will not prevent Jesus from reaching beyond walls of separation to welcome all into fellowship with him; *“for he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace ... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God”* (Ephesians 2:14-19). Nothing will prevent Jesus from coming into the presence of being present for even a nameless Samaritan woman, recognizing the tragic circumstances of her life and offering her that “living water” which the Savior of the world offers to all people at all times and in all places.

- “He has *seen* her – she *exists* for him, has worth, value, significance, and all of this is treatment to which she is unaccustomed... In the presence of the ‘light of the world,’ this woman leaves behind her ordinary tasks and life (symbolized by her water jar) to share the extraordinary news of the one who sees us truly and deeply (‘he told me everything I have done’), loves us as we are, and commissions us to share this news with others.” – David Lose.

In one sense, Jesus is not from “around here.” His earthly life was in a place far away in which the language, customs, and lifestyle were far different from that with which we are familiar. But in reality, Jesus is from “around here,” because his promise is that *“I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20), and our faith is rooted in our assurance that *“nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:39). Jesus is “around here” – with us always, calling and inviting all people to share the love of God for all people, the good news that is ours from the one who is for Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, Canadians, Americans, and all peoples *“the Savior of the world.”* Amen.