

John 4:5-42
FCC, Farmville
March 15, 2020
Third Sunday of Lent

Our society does not encourage us to value things we cannot see. The world we live in puts a great deal of emphasis on things that are visible and tangible. From time to time, however, we have experiences that remind us of the importance and vitality of the things in our life that are invisible.

Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well in the middle of a hot day and begins to talk with her about things that are invisible. The woman is amazed at the things Jesus says to her. At first, like Nicodemus, she does not understand. Jesus is talking about living water and she, for a moment, thinks he is still talking about something like what she can get from the well.

The woman's misunderstanding is not lost on us. We know it is difficult to understand things that Jesus says, especially when he is talking about something that cannot be seen with our naked eyes but must be seen with the eyes of our soul.

I think all of us long for an experience of the Holy. The problem is that spiritual experiences don't often manifest themselves in ways that can be seen, heard, or touched with our physical senses.

I have to tell you that I think it is really quite noteworthy that this story from John's Gospel, in which Jesus talks openly about something invisible – living water – comes up now, in the midst of our current struggle to come to terms with the coronavirus; also invisible. Of course, a virus can be seen with the aid of a microscope, but most of us have never actually seen one. However, we have seen and felt the very real effects of viruses on ourselves and others. Things that are invisible affect us every day. In fact, one could make the case that these invisible things are actually more real than the things we can see.

Jesus deals in invisible things. His conversation at the well is with a woman who was largely invisible to those around her. She came to the well at Noon, in the middle of the day when the heat was at it's worst. She did so because this was a time when no one else was likely to be there; after all, she was a woman with a past. She had several husbands, all of whom had either died or divorced her. That left her with few choices, all of which would have left her single or poor or dependent – and in those days, a bit of an outcast. Her coming to the well at Noon

is no doubt an indication that she was attempting to escape the company of the other women, because to be around them would have made her quite uncomfortable.

Additionally, in the first century there were rules about how men should interact with women. Based on the customs of the day, Jesus should not have been interacting with this woman in this place at this time. And he most certainly should not have been asking her for a drink of water.

Moreover, there were rules and expectations about how Jews should interact with Samaritans. Generally speaking, they were not supposed to interact at all, and not especially a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman. Jews and Samaritans disagreed about everything, especially when it came to important questions about religion. They were enemies of the first order.

To Jesus, this Samaritan woman should really have been invisible. But she wasn't. In a way that perhaps only Jesus could have done, Jesus manages to make her visible; visible to God, and to the others around her.

Writer Anne Lamott, in her autobiographical *Traveling Mercies*, describes her conversion to Christ. She also was feeling quite invisible – to God and to others. She was going through a hard time in her life, dealing with aftermath of an abortion, as well as the effects of too much alcohol in her daily life, and she was hiding out at her houseboat apartment. She describes an experience of the invisible.

“As I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner ... The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there ... But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

“And I was appalled ... I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, ‘I would rather die.’

“I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

“Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.”

The next thing that happened is that she wandered into a little Presbyterian church while a service was in progress.

“I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling — and it washed over me.

“I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels ... and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said ... ‘I quit ... All right. You can come in.’

“So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.”¹

Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at a well and spoke of invisible things – living water, a spirit God, who must be worshiped in spirit and in truth. And in an ordinary place on an ordinary day he made the invisible things visible. Not the least of those things was the Samaritan woman.

At first, she was confused by Jesus’s words about something she could not see, but very soon she caught on. She excitedly asked for the living water that she could have it “always.” And, when Jesus talked to her about her past, she went immediately to the others, even though up to this point, she had tried to remain unseen, and excitedly invited them to come and hear this Jesus. As a result of her witness many people came to hear Jesus for themselves and many came to believe that he is “the savior of the world.”

The woman in this story is so painfully invisible that she does not even merit a name – not even in John’s Gospel. But I am grateful for her today, during this season of Lent, for she reminds me that Jesus deals in the invisible. He comes to us in the midst of our ordinary lives, while we are busy and distracted by so many things parading in front of us, and he quietly, calmly, graciously offers us something we have never seen or touched or tasted before.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Lamott, Anne. (2000). *Traveling Mercies*, New York: Anchor, p. 109.

Creator God,

you see everything, and you see it all perfectly, including each of us. And, not only do you see us perfectly, but you love us perfectly as well.

Forgive us when we hide ourselves from you and one another, when we seek a cloak for our lives because we do not wish to be seen.

Thank you for reaching out to us and helping us to understand that, because of your perfect love for us, nothing has to be kept in secret; that our deepest longings can be made visible to you. More than that, make us eager and always ready to meet you when you reach out to us. Help us to be open to you when you show up in front of us in the ordinary moments of our lives, and in the unexpected places.

Lord, even though we try to see you, sometimes you remain invisible to us. Show us where to look.

Through Jesus, the Christ we pray. Amen.