

“Water and Worship”

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We worship not because we understand God but because we trust him.

John 4:1-26

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Where is God?

It really is true that some people disproportionately suffer. Linda and I have been in touch with at least eight or ten individuals and families this week going through difficult times. In many cases it just seems they never get a break. Whether it's financial or family or career or health – and sometimes all of those back-to-back or simultaneously – the tsunamis of tragedy or trouble seem to go looking for them.

Meanwhile, I finished reading Philip Yancey's 2021 memoir this week. Yancey's best-selling books often deal with suffering – *Disappointment with God*, *The Gift of Pain*, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Reading his story, I understand why. Having left the hospital against medical advice, his father died of polio when Yancey was 13 months old. His disillusioned mother raised two boys in poverty and a religious system that Yancey experienced as oppressive and abusive.

When I finished that book, I picked up the current issue of *Christianity Today*, which is the annual issue highlighting Christian books published in the previous year. I ordered the “book of the year”: *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep*. Tish Harrison Warren opens by recounting her dark year when her Dad died, she miscarried twice, and almost lost her own life from hemorrhaging.

It's true: people suffer disproportionately, and sometimes that suffering comes in waves. You already think you're drowning and another tidal wave breaks. I've often wondered why that hasn't been true for Linda and me. Her Sunday School class has been reading two books by Robert Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules* and *The Jordan River Rules*, both about facing difficult times. Rob was our classmate in college, and his wife died after a long battle with multiple sclerosis between the writing of these two books.

Comparing his story and the stories of others – including many of you – Linda and I have lived a very comfortable life. Sometimes it's hard to know what to say to those who suffer when we haven't.

A Samaritan woman

If the woman at the well were to relate her own backstory, she might tell us that she never got a break. We're not told a lot about her life prior to the encounter with Jesus in John 4, so Bible readers and preachers and movie-makers tend to imagine it. Some of what's been said about her to spice up this story is patently biased, and/or spiced with even juicier fabrications. Let me give you my version.

Let's start with her people, the Samaritans. While it's true we've reframed the word positively – think “Samaritan's Purse” or the “Good Samaritan Fund” – we've only done so because of Jesus and the Gospels. This woman seems to know something about Samaritan history and theology. She might remind you that her people had suffered for more than seven centuries.

When the Assyrians had crushed and terrorized the Mediterranean Rim in 722 BC, God spared Jerusalem by a miraculous deliverance, but not Samaria. Her ancestors had been killed or scattered and replaced with peoples of other races and religions. The surviving remnant pointed to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy that Mount Gerizim in Samaria, not Jerusalem, was to be the worship center of Israel. Joshua had renewed the covenant in the central hills of Canaan hundreds of years before the City of David was even occupied by Jews.

The Samaritans had built their own temple on Gerizim, a temple dedicated to Yahweh, not the pagan idols of their ancestors. They followed the laws of Moses, circumcised their sons, and kept the Sabbath. They believed their neighbors to the south were not following the Law of Moses when they built the temple in Jerusalem. To top it all off, when the Jews regained independence in the second century B.C., they destroyed the Samaritans' temple on Gerizim. The fault lines ran deep.

Because of these differences in biblical understanding, Jews in Jesus' day would not associate with Samaritans, but not because they were ritually unclean. In John 4 Jesus drinks their water, the disciples buy food in their town, and they all stay in Sychar for two days. In all four Gospels, nobody accuses Jesus of breaking kosher laws by eating and drinking with Samaritans.

Still, to call someone a “Samaritan” was an insult – the same as calling someone a “Galilean.” Bad blood oozed. The most pious Jews would go out of their way to avoid even traveling through Samaria, but there's no evidence Jesus did so (see Luke 9:52-53). It's not that the Samaritans were considered pagan; they weren't excommunicated until centuries after the time of Jesus. It's just that they were inferior. The Samaritans thought the same about the Jews. It was a religious pride war.

The woman at the well was born into this disrespected people, but her personal life added layers to the pain. She was a reject among rejects. Some of the disdain is undeserved. If you think of her as having left five different husbands and then shacking up with another guy because she was incapable of secure attachment, that's not how it happened in cultures shaped by the Torah. Women didn't have that option. More than likely, one husband after another had divorced her. Who knows why?

Maybe she was a very attractive teenager whose parents died and who had no other family. Maybe she had to marry young. Maybe she was added to a harem and kicked out by a rival wife. Maybe the next husband didn't like her spunk and abused her. And so on. Finally, when the fifth husband rejected her, maybe every woman in town found her threatening. Maybe she had a child or a few by then. To survive, her alternatives were homelessness and starvation or shelter offered by yet another man who used her but didn't really love her.

What I'm trying to do is to evoke some empathy for her situation before she meets Jesus in John 4. What might have happened to her?

Dehydration meets thirst

Nobody seemed really to care for this spiritually dehydrated woman until Jesus. He wasn't one to avoid Samaria or Samaritans. He made a beeline through Samaria to the well outside her town just to meet her. He was tired that day, too tired to accompany his disciples on their grocery run into Sychar. He was also thirsty.

She had undoubtedly noticed him but had simply planned to complete her errand and ignore him. If she thought anything of him, she probably thought of him as another pathetic man who only thought of women for what they could get from them, whether it was sex or children or an errand girl to haul water from a well.

"Why are you, a Jewish man, asking a Samaritan woman for a drink?" I don't know if his accent or clothing gave him away, or maybe she had crossed paths with his disciples. She knew he "ain't from 'round here."

When Jesus answers with puzzling words about "the gift of God" and "living water" she misinterprets his metaphor as literal – as Nicodemus had done about being "born again." She asks if he think he's better than Jacob, who dug and used the well generations before. Most Jews tend to think they're better than everybody, she thinks.

Jesus' next words are even more puzzling. He speaks of "never thirsting again" and "a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

I don't know if her next words are inquisitive or sarcastic. "I'll take some of that water. I'm a little tired of coming out here to get my own."

Jesus asks. "How about you call your husband?"

“I don’t have one.” This seems to be the turning point in the conversation. I imagine a pause. She looks down at first, ashamed of her story. He waits, then compliments her. “You’re *right*, and what you say is *true*.”

She’s opened a crevice of vulnerability. He wants her to know he already knows all about her. He is speaking to her not in spite of her story but because of it. He came looking for her because her thirst was precisely the one he wanted to quench. “You’ve had five husbands, and you’re living with yet another man, unmarried.”

She answers with the best religious language she can muster. “You’re a prophet, aren’t you?” She brings a point similar to a Protestant who wants to know why Catholics worship Mary, or a Muslim who asks why Christians believe in three Gods. She thinks she can win an argument if one ensues. “We follow Moses around here, so we worship here at Gerizim. You Jews worship in Jerusalem.” She knows her history.

He uses the same word to address her that he had used with his mother at the wedding. “Woman, the place is soon going to be obsolete. Salvation is from the Jews, but worship is getting ready to change. It will be all about the Spirit, all about the truth, because God is spirit.”

“Yes,” she says. “I know. The Messiah will be the one who straightens it all out.”

Jesus says to her, “I am. The one speaking to you.” Later in John, “I am,” will almost get Jesus stoned. Those words are blasphemy both to Jew and Samaritan. She knows them as well as any Jew, from the book of Exodus. “I am who I am.”

Water and worship

If I’m right that the story of this woman in John 4 parallels all who have ever felt like life keeps pummeling them repeatedly and mercilessly, then Jesus’ response to her is his response to others who feel the same way. She’s very different from Nicodemus in John 3. He *felt* blessed because he was blessed. Life had treated him well – and he had stability, religious training, privilege, and power. *People knew him, respected him, wanted to be him*. But he was missing something, so he came to Jesus.

Nobody wanted to be her – a Samaritan woman whom life had knocked to the ground and repeatedly kicked again.

So how did Jesus respond to her, and how might he respond to someone else who feels the same way? With water and worship.

Jesus never responds to two different people in the same way. Never. Ever. Should I say that again? Jesus doesn’t have a canned speech that he’s rehearsed to fit every human need. What he says here might not help you because it’s designed to help her. But it might help as well.

Water. What Jesus does for her is to reframe everything she thinks about water. She has to go get it. Daily. It requires effort and drudgery. It results in sore muscles and a limited supply that she'll have to replenish the next day in the same way. Her daily dehydration is a story of isolation – partly perhaps due to her own choices but even those choices have a lot to do with what happened to her.

We live in a culture of isolation – some of it imposed by conditions beyond our control (coronavirus) – but some of it is chosen. The virus waxes and wanes, but for many it's just a convenient excuse to hide. Or it's become a pattern now hard to break. There are opportunities here and lots of places to connect or reconnect, but that would require admitting that it feels safer and easier to draw the curtain and hide. Even if you're thirsty.

What if water came looking for her? That's what happened that noonday. When Jesus showed up that day asking for a drink, he was the living water flowing toward a dehydrated, disheartened, discouraged woman who had assumed there was no way the rest of her life could ever improve. He wanted her to know that there was a stream of life-giving water available to her that would never be dependent on a man, a well, or a situation. She would have to – and could – have her thirst quenched by a God who was looking for her before she ever thought to look for him. The good news of the gospel is that the arrow of effort has been reversed. A spring of water has found us.

Worship. There's a common thread that runs through the writings of Philip Yancey, Tish Warren, and Rob Morgan. They write differently, and I suspect that their books would help different people. Morgan is an experienced Baptist pastor. Warren is an Episcopal priest. I'm not sure where Yancey has gone to church most of his life, but he's now living somewhere in the backwoods of Colorado which means his church is likely to be rural and small.

What they have in common is that they don't try to answer the hard questions that no one can answer – why bad things happen. They all tell you that they had to look beyond the moment, even the succession of moments, even their own lifetime, and discover the God who is above it all and nevertheless came looking for them.

Yancey experiences God in the “beauty, joy, softness (and) unrestraint” of a girl named Janet. She teaches him love can meet pain and point upward.

Morgan finds comfort in the death of his wife at precisely 11:11am on 11/11, Veterans Day. His son-in-law reminds him that Jesus said in John 11:11, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I'm on my way to wake him up.” Scripture is his solace.

Warren prays a prayer from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, a bedtime prayer that begins, “The Lord Almighty grant us a peaceful night and perfect end.... Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night.” She says that the borrowed prayers of those who suffered before her are all that sustained her.

I share their books and their stories because they have all suffered in ways I have not. Otherwise this is an intellectual sermon from someone some of you might think cannot relate to your own suffering. All of them experienced what the woman at the well experienced.

We worship not because we understand God but because we trust him. The suffering is inexplicable, but it is not irredeemable. Not by the God who meets us at our point of need and keeps loving us until he takes us home. Amen.