

John 4: 5-42

As we said last week, Lent can be a time when we challenge ourselves to see God in a new and fresh way...but what happens when how we look at the world may actually keep us from seeing God in the first place.

I want to tell you a story about a woman who was told a long time ago that she was not pretty enough, not smart enough, and not worthy of love... and so she found herself in one relationship after another living out the story she believed about herself. A story that someone else gave her.

So, her life was disconnected from others as she sought out love and acceptance that in her heart she knew she was never really worthy of. So, her life was sabotaged right from the start...all because she was living into a narrative, she believed was true about herself that other people gave to her... Do you happen to know anyone like this?!

Now this woman, filled with shame would go to the well and gather water when no one else was around. But today was different. Today there was a stranger there, a young Jewish Rabbi of all people and he was interested in her story...in fact He even seemed to know everything about her...

He then replaced her story about herself with a new one...a new narrative for her...one filled with Love and Hope...and she was so changed by this that she left her water jar behind and joyfully ran to the very strangers who shunned her to tell them that she was seen...and had been touched by God...and they believed her...and she would be forever changed as a result.

The contrast between last week's gospel and this week's couldn't be stronger: Nicodemus is male, Jewish, and a religious authority – the ultimate insider and named. The woman today is a woman with no name, a hated Samaritan and in the wrong place to ever find God (the wrong mountain), she's the ultimate outsider; and she is drawing water at high noon (in the heat of the day) to avoid others (the women of the community would do their chores in the cooler mornings together).

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, believed he knew the right way to have a relationship with God. The Samaritan Women - the marginalized... shows the wrong way to have a relationship with God.

Notice how the two stories are juxtaposed in John's gospel: Nicodemus has it all! Yet he approaches Jesus at night...hidden and cloaked...he doesn't get it – and he leaves their meeting unchanged.

This marginalized woman meets Jesus in the light of day...noon with no shadows...all is revealed...and she leaves forever changed. And notice she even leaves the most important thing behind, her earthly possession...her water vessel, in order to share her joy and the good news of what just happened to her.

See Jesus knows her true story...that she has worth and value and significance, - and that she matters very much to God! Then she goes out and shares her encounter with God to others.

In fact, one of the most powerful tools for evangelism and growing a church is sharing our stories... and telling others the way that God has shown up and touched our own lives.

This woman brought her water jar - The vessel that collected her earthly need. But after her encounter with Jesus, she leaves it behind.

This vessel represents so many things. It holds “her” story and she leaves it. Is it possible to encounter God in such a way that our earthly vessels are no longer needed? Today I want to focus on the stories we hold inside ourselves...our own vessels...inside our own hearts and minds!

What follows came from a guest speaker at Mars Hill Church in MI where my friend Kent Dobson was pastor...the irony is that this was so long ago that I can't remember the woman's name, but I still remember the story...just like today's readings.

And she told a related story...of a friend she had that was going through a very ugly divorce. That painful process got harder and harder, and uglier and uglier before it ended...so her life became totally defined by these messages of failure and hatred and ugliness...and those voices kept getting louder and louder in her head...and so one day in the middle of it all she goes and gets a tattoo - she asked the artist to simply tattoo the word “GOOD” on the inside of her wrist...

And she had it written in such a way that only she could see it. So, when her friends asked her why they couldn't see her tattoo - she says no, no, no...this is only for me...I don't care at all what anybody else thinks. I am in such grave danger of believing that there is nothing good left inside me...I need to see this word a thousand times a day as a reminder that I am still good.

Now is there a word for you that if you believed it with all your heart would tell your story?

And sometimes we can see another's story by just going over to their house and sharing a meal with them. She related of a friend that was dating and as she was getting more serious in her relationship, she visited her boyfriend's mom's house for dinner, after which she said to

Him...I learned something new about you today...before I met your family, I didn't know that you were stupid.

She said I have known you for a while now...you're smart and talented and good at your job, but you live with this constant fear and insecurity that you're gonna mess up...I never understood until today where that came from!

As you sat around your family's table, they treated you like you were dumb...in the little things they said and did, and you didn't even notice!

They were feeding you lies and deep down you believed them and you made it part of who you are. Classic gaslighting!

How powerful! I wonder if you know anyone like that? I know lots of folks like this...I'm one of them...

...and I wonder if you are also aware of how much power you wield over your own children in the stories that you are helping to create for them!

...And then there's some people who live their lives and their story because of a tragic or defining moment that happened to them once perhaps a long time ago... and they are still living that story over and over again...and ALL their lives then become colored by that one moment that they experienced in their past.

Sometimes there are these old stories, stories of who we used to be, stories that someone else told us, stories that may never have even been true to begin with, but they somehow get tangled up inside us.

And instead of living the story our creator wrote for us, we find ourselves stuck in these other stories ...and we leave no room for something new to be written... no space for God to write upon our hearts.

Jesus says it like this: “You were lost and now you’ve been found, you were blind but now you see, you were deaf but now you hear. You were dead but now you are alive.” What do you think God is trying over and over and over again to tell us... Not our History... but His Story!

What if you really lived life as though you are loveable? What if you lived as though you were not defined by your past failures? What if the messages you were given as a child: that you weren’t good enough, strong enough, smart enough, pretty enough. What if those stories no longer define who you are?

NOW the story you tell about yourself determines how you live...it’s the lens through which you come to see the world. It becomes a governor or a limiter to your potential. The story you believe about yourself determines your choices and defines how you live your life... so it really, really, matters!

So, if you believe in a story that is God authored, that’s about life, that’s about redemption, that’s about being good enough even before you were even created - then you will live out that story!’

But if you believe in a story full of dead ends and failures that’s defined by your limitations...then you’ll never have the space or freedom to live God’s story as it was written for you before you were even born. Lent is a time for creating that space.

So, picture your heart, Picture this fragile beating tissue with words imprinted upon it...big black letters that inform the story you are living at this moment...and for some of us these words have been stamped over and over again into our hearts so that they pierce our flesh.

...now picture a loving creator...taking a paintbrush and painting over all those words...painting words instead like: **good enough... forgiven... peace... freedom... unconditional love...**

Now THIS is the story that's always been true...the story that has been gifted to all of us through grace...God's been telling us this story since the beginning of time!

And YOU don't have to live the story of your life that someone told you... not even one more day...not even another hour...you don't have to be defined by what someone else has said about you... you don't have to be defined by your pain, or your failures, or your addictions... you can be defined right now by the story of love and redemption that Jesus has been trying to write on your heart all along.

So if you choose to believe that you're stupid, that God could never use someone like you (think about Peter), that you are defined by your pain, that you'll never be free, and that you'll never be good enough, ...then you will be missing out on experiencing the joy, the hope, the peace, the freedom, the love and the purpose that God has always wanted for you since you were born.

As Christians we must be very careful and very deliberate about which stories we allow to define us...and as a community of love we must also help one another to see God's story written in their lives...

So now picture those negative words some of you have held on to...worthless, dumb, ugly, unworthy, victim, unlovable ...and picture letting these words fall to the ground and fade. Like water upon the desert sands...

Now into that empty space that has been created I want to tell you the story of who God says that you are:

You are a masterpiece...created a new...You are a child of God...with purpose – not an orphan...never alone... your brokenness will never define who you are...You are Whole... and You are Holy... You are forgiven – your debts have been paid for...You are Free... and most importantly YOU BELONG and YOU ARE LOVED... UNCONDITIONALLY and without reserve by your Creator!

So may you have the courage to empty out your vessel and live the story that has been written on your heart by a God who loves you.

May you erase, shred, delete, and walk away from the narratives in your lives that someone gave to you a long time ago...these stories that don't reflect God's story for you.

And may the words tattooed on your wrist... and on your hearts... and in your lives...always be stories of love, freedom, peace, and hope.

Your faithful servant,

carmen