***7 Stops on the Road To Resurrection:***

***Week 3: Reappraisals Long Overdue***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 3, 2024 based on John 4:7-19, 25-29*

In an effort to begin to understand the Samaritan woman in this morning’s text, let me open with a first-person reflection by a woman named, Shaista Aziz, a British journalist. She’s been in the news lately regarding the war in Gaza. She says …

*I was born and raised [in England]. I live [t]here. I’m unquestionably British. I’ve been told that when I speak, I sound like Harry Potter, which is appropriate because I am very much a fearless Gryffindor.*

*But I’m also the daughter of Pakistani immigrants. I’m Muslim, I’ve always been spiritual, and I choose to wear the hijab while examining my personal relationship with Islam.*

*When people look at me, they assume I’m an immigrant or a refugee. Often in restaurants or at the theater, I am talked* ***at****, not* ***to****. Waiters and ticket takers try* ***not*** *to look at me, they ignore me, and then I speak, and I see confusion kick in as they try to figure out who I am.*

*The only time people don’t ignore a hijab-wearing woman is when they hate you or they suspect you of being a terrorist.*

*Years ago while I was working in France on a* [*BBC TV documentary*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5VS8FbdSjR5HF1xMHxfT9zZ/q-a-with-presenter-shaista-aziz) *about what it means to be young, French, and Muslim … I walked into the reception area of the French Parliament to interview* [*Marion Le Pen*](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/16/marion-marechal-le-pen-young-face-france-far-right-front-national)*, a far-right member of Parliament.*

*The receptionist looked horrified when she realized that I was the British journalist who had scheduled an appointment with Marion Le Pen. “You cannot enter this building wearing that thing,” she said, pointing to my hijab. “It is not allowed. There is a law against it.”*

*“But I’m not French. I’m British,” I said. “I’m as British as fish and chips.”*

*She paused and then responded, “O.K., you can proceed.”*

*Everywhere I went that day, I was asked where I was from by taxi drivers and shopkeepers. I figured my British accent gave me away. But it was a French Muslim woman who pointed out what was my real otherness.*

*I asked her whether it was obvious that I wasn’t French.*

*“Yes,” she responded. “We can tell you are not French. You wear a hijab, you walk with confidence. You are not apologetic.”*

Ms. Aziz’ experience gives us a very schooled example of how people, women in particular, can be singled out, sized up, wrongly or rightly, depending on what one wears, how one talks, and also the confidence or lack of confidence that person exudes.

When Shaista Aziz is in England she is seen by most as an outsider, and yet she is a proud insider. In Paris, she is still proud, but proud to be an outsider.

Now, to the woman in the Bible story appointed for today. First of all, she is from Samaria, and therefore she is an outsider to Judean Jews because of an old disagreement. The discord had to do with exactly the things that Jesus and this woman discuss by Jacob’s well in the noonday sun.

Where was the genuine temple of the Hebrew God supposed to be located? The Samaritans argued that the true temple was up north on Mt. Gerazim in Samaria. But Judean Jews said it should be in the south, in Jerusalem. Samaritans said, that was a travesty. God never meant Solomon to build that one in the first place. “Look in the scriptures,” they’d say.

It was a long-standing disagreement and one that simmered between these two distinct parts of Judaism for a very long time.

She is also an outsider on a personal level by virtue of the fact that she comes to the well in the full light of day, at noon rather than at times when other women would be there.

The custom was that women would gather either early in the morning when it was relatively cool or, late in the day to replenish the household supply of water.

But this woman came at a time of low traffic, to avoid meeting other women. She was, after all, a scandal and an outcast in town. People said that she had been married too often. Yes, and the man with whom she was living now was not her husband.

So the “reputable” women of the town avoided her. “Don’t get too close to someone with a bad reputation,” is the idea. “She’s like Covid.”

The setting itself is a give-away. A well isn’t called a watering hole for nothing. The town well in an ancient Middle Eastern village was the gathering place of women, and also the place where a man might venture to talk with a woman he was not acquainted with, if he was brazen enough.

The Bible records a number of romantic connections that begin at wells. Isaac and Rebecca; Jacob and Rachel; Moses and Zipporah. All three couples have their own well stories.

This is an element not lost on the gospel writer, John as he tells the story of Jesus who meets a woman by what he calls “Jacob’s well,” a woman who has been married five times and who now has a live-in boyfriend. She is a woman who, because of her questionable reputation, might as well live under a rock.

But she doesn’t. Ironically, she comes to the well at noon, a time when there are no shadows. Why? Because the heat and light of day give her a kind of cover and she does not have to endure the scorn and rejection of others who will be at the well at more desirable hours.

The banter between Jesus and this woman reminds us of last week’s story of Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night. The conversations these two have with Jesus is, ironically, similar. In each case they talk past one other.

The Samaritan woman misunderstands Jesus. Like Nicodemus, she takes him literally or doesn’t get his point about what kind of water he is talking about -- drinking water or “living water.”

The same thing happens when they discuss the subject of her husbands, which is excruciating for her.

Jesus speaks very plainly and she, for her part, is a master at deflecting the conversation. She’s good at protecting herself. She is obviously practiced at it.

She is excellent at changing the subject, of hiding in plain sight.

Ironically, she has mastered the art of living in absolute darkness while standing squarely in the glare of a noonday sun.

Now, the usual interpretation is that she was the town scandal; having had five husbands. But as womanist scholars and fresh readings of first century marital requirements have made plain, it is possible that this woman is more a victim of social ostracism and social constraint than anything else.

She is simply and sadly a woman caught in a system designed by men that has made her a pawn.

Bear with me, here – this is difficult material and for a number of socially fraught reasons. Marriage was everything in the first century. It was the closest thing to a safety net a woman could have, and it was a very bad one at that.

A woman who was not married was considered a threat to the social order. Moreover, a woman with this woman’s particular background, who was not currently connected to a man lawfully, was particularly scary to other married women.

Again, were talking about safety nets. The Jewish law dictated that if your husband died, his next oldest brother was obligated to marry you.

Remember the Sadducees grilling Jesus about this? If a woman was married seven times in succession to a string of brothers who died one after the other ... the question was raised, “Whose wife would she be in the afterlife?”

BTW, If you are a married woman listening to this and you want to connect with this woman, think of your brother-in-law if you have one .. or more. Kinda creepy.

Moving on … maybe this woman had experienced more than her share of misfortune. Maybe her five husbands had poor health and died, leaving her at the mercy of her husband’s family and the law’s requirements, which were not proving to be friendly to her.

It’s not unlikely that she had been abused. Maybe she had to divorce in order to protect herself and her children. Maybe there was violence in her marriages.

**Or, look**, maybe the man with whom she was living without benefit of marriage was the kindest of the lot, the true soul mate that it had taken her five husbands (and a lot of disappointment) to find. Who knows? Do you know? Do I know? No.

None of us fully knows the burden that others bear or the challenges that they face in life, due to the culture, or the times they live in.

Which is where I want to enter this story. Because something happens at the end of the story that I find both a little scary and very reassuring, at the same time.

Remember Jesus talks with her about fetching her husband, and he tells her that he knows that the man she is with is **not** her husband, although she calls him that. And she, in response to Jesus outing her marital history, changes the subject. “I see that you are a prophet,” she says.

The disciples arrive just at that moment, and, like the women of the village, they are upset that Jesus is talking with her. They don’t like the optics of the thing.

But the Samaritan woman at this point is ecstatic. She is impressed by all that Jesus has said to her. So she tells everybody in town, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. Could he be the Messiah ?”

Now, let’s not take this as a kind of palm reading, or something supernatural. If we do that, we will miss the heart of the story.

I mean, look, what’s really blowing her mind is the fact that he knows all about her *and yet he does not run away from her* like everybody else who takes for granted that they know her.

Put yourself in her shoes. He knows *every thing* she ever did. Bur it’s not the knowing that is so astounding, it’s the knowing *every thing,* and not shaming her. That is the part that is meant to amaze.

I mean, look, all of us have parts of our lives that we do not wish to have others know. Right? We all have some history we don’t want anyone to know; things we don’t even want to recall ourselves.

In our brains there are boxes tucked away that are filled with old pictures, and old stories. We have stored them in the attic of our memory to be forgotten, but we cannot really get away with that because things keep happening which remind us of them. Right?

We look at a movie and a character reminds us of something unsavory we once did, yes, and BANG! There it is, a mirror held up to us by life. And we can’t get away from it.

Every unkind word, every mean thing we have done, every criticism we have leveled unfairly, every fear that we have hid, every uncharacteristic screaming at our children when we were at our wits end behind closed doors; every argument with our spouse where what we said we can’t take back -- all of it.

“Come and see a man who told me *everything* I have ever done,” she said. Could he be the Messiah ?”

Well, let’s consider that maybe there’s something special about him. Because who else would be able to take us in like that? Who else would know everything about us, all the dark corners, the places where we hide, the truth we do not wish to have Instagrammed, or whispered to our friends, or our children.

Remember that even when his disciples came and saw them together there, in public, and were obviously thinking, “Why are you talking to her?” -- he didn’t run away.

And that is the promise and the hope of this remarkable story. The woman of Samaria is not some sordid “other” person. No, she is us. She is the part of you and me that we hide, that we keep closed-off in fear and shame.

What happens at the watering hole of Jacob’s well one day between Jesus and a woman of Samaria was that the truth was told and no one ran away. Not Jesus, and not the woman, either.

I love that. I love that she did not flee. Think of the times you ran away before you stopped and stood your ground.

The first stanza of one of my favorite Joni Mitchell songs comes to mind. Like so many of her ballads, it’s about a troubled relationship: She says,

*Just before our love got lost you said  
"I am as constant as a northern star"  
And I said, "Constantly in the darkness. Where's that at?  
If you want me I'll be in the bar" …*

*I could drink a case of you and still be on my feet.*

Proud women.

Finally, on this Celebration of Creativity Sunday, let me remind us all of one more proud and little understood woman. My favorite art exposition in ages was at our own Portland Art Museum last year, showing the works of Frida Kahlo alongside work by a portly fellow she was long associated with. What was his name? I’m kidding but only slightly.

During her short life she was always in Diego Rivera’s shadow. In February of 1933 she was referred to in the pages of the *Detroit News* as “the wife of the master mural painter.” That paper said, “[She] gleefully dabbles in works of art.” How appalling and patronizing of them.

Well, time has a habit of clarifying things. Today Rivera is known most often as “Frida Kahlo’s husband.”

It was lonely for her just as life was lonely for the Samaritan woman. One biographer said “for Kahlo, painting was a way of coping with being alone. That is, she painted herself as a second self, or ‘imaginary companion’, because she was so often emotionally alone.” (Gannit Ankori)

I find that interesting but I mean, look -- what she put on canvas was so much more than that. Diego Rivera knew this himself, and it haunted him.

He spoke of her once in amazing poetic terms. Let the image of the woman behind his words be seen in honor of the Samaritan woman, as well. Here is what Rivera said about Frida Kahlo …

*There was this skinny kid, with these eyebrows, shouting up at me, "Diego, I want to show you my paintings!" But, of course, she made me come down to her, and I did, and I've never stopped looking. But I want to speak about Frida not as her husband, but as an artist.*

*I admire her. Her work is acid and tender... hard as steel... and fine as a butterfly's wing. Loveable as a smile... cruel as... the bitterness of life. I don't believe... that ever before has a women put such agonized poetry on canvas.*

**Amen**