

First Presbyterian Church
John 4:4-23 Wilderness: Surprise Encounter
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/8/2026

The last few weeks we have been focusing on the theme of wilderness in our journey through the season of Lent.

The first week of Lent, as God's beloved children,
we joined Jesus on his 40 days in the desert
-- day and night. We realized the importance of opening ourselves
to God's work in the dark times of our lives.

Speaking of the dark, last week we looked at the nighttime meeting
between Nicodemus and Jesus where Jesus thoroughly confused
Nicodemus by saying he needed to be born again –
which really means being born *from above*.

So ... 40 days and nights,
a meeting between Jesus and a powerful man at night,
and this week, an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman
in the middle of the day.

There's a lot happening here with the themes of darkness and light,
which are very important themes in the Gospel of John.

Think of Nicodemus:

Educated Jewish man in a powerful position as a Pharisee
and a member of the Sanhedrin who comes to Jesus in the night.

Now think of this woman:

Unnamed Samaritan woman who is an outcast even in her own community,
going out to draw water who meets Jesus in the middle of the day.

John's gospel constructs these stories to function as total inversions of each other –
as different as night and day.

Jesus cares for them both and invites them into what God is doing,
but it is the woman from Samaria who walks in the light.

The Samaritan woman, meeting Jesus in the noonday sun,
introduces us to the wilderness of being excluded, abandoned, ignored,
or forgotten.

...The wilderness of not being okay according to other people.

Through his amazing book, "Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes"

Kenneth Bailey has helped me understand

just how inappropriate the interaction between Jesus and this woman
would have been.

For one thing, Jesus, as a man,

had no business speaking to a woman he does not know.

Bailey reports that "Throughout forty years of life in the Middle East
I never crossed this social boundary line.

In village society a strange man does not even make
eye contact with a woman in a public place."

On top of that, Jesus, as a Jew, had no business receiving a drink from a Samaritan
because it would have been considered religiously unclean.

Bailey explains:

**"Jesus ignored the five-hundred-year-old hostility that had developed
between Jews and Samaritans. Three hundred years earlier the Greeks
had used Samaria as a base for their control of Jewish territory. The
Jews found occasion to retaliate (128 BC) by destroying the Samaritan
temple on the summit of Mt. Gerizim. The Samaritans responded by
penetrating the temple area of Jerusalem a few years before the birth of
Jesus and scattering the bones of the dead across the area on the eve
of Passover in order to defile the complex and make it impossible for the
Jews to keep the feast. Jesus set aside all the bitterness of past history as
he requested a drink from this Samaritan woman."**

The uncomfortable awkwardness of this encounter
plays out in many ways throughout their dialogue.

Many of us have baggage that we don't let other people know about.

Stuff we're embarrassed by, or don't know how to put into words.

Experiences that still bother us

even though we think we should be over it by now.

We worry that if others knew, they would treat us differently.

Sometimes these things are blown out of proportion in our minds.
But you might also have a background that would raise some eyebrows
if people knew about it.
The kind of thing that could keep you from being invited back.

Have you ever felt like that?
Have you ever hung onto something inside you
without letting other people know? What did that do to you?
An abortion. A divorce. An affair. Job loss. Bankruptcy. Estranged relationships.
A bad decision that made you feel foolish. Addiction. A criminal conviction.

Now, look – I would not be shocked to hear any of this. I’ve heard it all.
And Jesus certainly isn’t afraid of people who have a past.
But when it’s *your* skeleton in the closet,
it feels like a dark secret that could unravel your whole life.

Walking with this stuff in isolation is living in a wilderness.
It's not the intentional wilderness of Lent where we prepare and reflect.
It's the dangerous kind of spiritual wilderness
where you can get stuck, and lost, and hurt.
Maybe never find a way back.

When facing deep isolation and shame,
people can become permanently incapacitated or even die.

Where is God when someone is going through that? Why does it feel so lonely?

The woman in this passage of John 4
is all of us who have felt that way; who fear being seen.

There's a poem written by Sarah Speed that opens this up for me
in a powerful way:

The Wilderness is A Place of Isolation; It is Also a Place of Connection
by Sarah Speed

*We sat around a six person table,
For don't most holy moments happen
around a table?
Six women, six heartbeats, six names and identities.*

*We gathered there once every twelve days,
To read and pray, to learn each other's names.
It was nothing more than a burger bar,*

*And we were nothing more than the truths we shared,
So sitting around a basket of fries,
I assumed I knew everyone there.*

*But then the woman directly to my right
Said quietly to the group of six that night,
"I had an abortion when I was young."
And my heart stopped. And my heart sunk.*

*For she had kept this wilderness in.
She had carried this weight alone.
She had grieved and prayed for peace,
And I had never even known.*

*She went on to speak of hurt and grief,
Of a prayer to God to end suffering.
She went on to tell us her most
vulnerable truth,
And in an instant that small leather booth
Became church.*

*For in naming the wilderness,
that space became
Not only the place of her greatest pain,
But also the place where we became
One.*

*In an instant, she became her own light.
And in an instant, we were changed.
For in that instant, we saw her
wilderness walk,
So in that instant, we became
Six names, six united identities,
one heartbeat.*

*I think the wilderness does that.
Sometimes you walk it alone.
And sometimes you tell that story
And a booth becomes home.*

This poem reveals how God uses the church – as the body of Christ –
to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ in our own day.

When we live in vulnerable honesty with each other,
when we create spaces of safety to know and be known,
when we join the Holy Spirit in the work of healing
the wounds and experiences that keep us
from receiving God's love.

But the dynamic missing from the poem which is so central to John 4
is not only personal embarrassment,
but also the smoldering tension between the two peoples
going back centuries.

Of course, we can all identify a similar tension
between modern day peoples living in the same land where Jesus lived,
because our nation has been drawn into a war between them.

And here in our own community, we also live side by side as people
who share deep animosity toward one another:
Who have wounded each other and who mistrust one another.
We live with divisions in our communities that lead to people
going out of their way to avoid contact with each other.
As between the Jews and Samaritans, there are dividing lines
in ways of worship in our day.

For instance, one church I'm aware of in our area uses social media videos
from far right political influencers to hype people up before worship –
a pretty stark contrast to our organ introit.

Like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman,
we stand in contrast with each other like day and night.
It is hard to conceive of how there could possibly
be a reconciliation across these groups.

Yet Jesus is shown in John's gospel to show up
right at the intersection of these differences.

Listen for this dynamic in Jesus' words in v. 21-24:

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

Though we are a nation at war, though we may feel at odds with our neighbor,
is there not one God who has made us all?

Is there not one Spirit who calls and invites us
into the reconciling life of Christ?

Are we will to be, as Jesus puts it, "the kind of worshippers the Father seeks"?
Or will remain beholden to our grudges and grievances?

What connects Jesus and the Samaritan woman isn't
arguing out all their differences and resolving who was right
and who was wrong.

The connection comes from seeing one another's humanity
and recognizing the movements of God's Spirit within one another.

In the wilderness we sometimes have surprise encounters.

How would you respond if sometime during your journey with the Spirit,
you were brought face to face with someone
you weren't supposed to talk to?