

March 13 | John 4:9-14

Read

“The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’

Reflect

The story of the “Woman at the Well” is fairly well known among most church-goers. Jesus purposely passes through Samaria. He stops at Jacob’s well to rest. A woman approaches to draw water. He asks her for a drink. She retorts, “Why would a Jew ask a Samaritan for a drink?” “If you knew...” Jesus said. She doesn’t know that the Messiah is with her. The conversation blooms into a story of healing, forgiveness, and redemption. There’s even an old song about it.

We read biblical stories with the luxury of hindsight. We know the story, the characters, and the ultimate outcome. Easily, we can imagine an ending that proves to be more favorable to us. “I’ll bet if they had known, then...” we think to ourselves. “If that had been me, I would have known that...” If we’re being honest, do we truly think that we would have responded differently?

It seems rather realistic to acknowledge that like the woman at the well, we’re often clueless. How often we move through our days with little to no awareness of the very presence of God. We do what needs to (or must be) done without seeing where God might be in our midst. Like the lady in the story, we do our daily tasks as we usually do without the least expectation of encountering God. The song “One of Us” poses a deeply provocative question. The chorus asks, “*What if God was one of us, Just a slob like one of us, Just a stranger on the bus, Tryin’ to make His way home?*”

Recenter

Refocus: *Richard Rohr teaches “We cannot attain the presence of God because we’re already totally in the presence of God. What’s absent is awareness.” God is always present. The problem is our minds distract us from envisioning that reality. Take a moment to sit quietly. Consider how to become more aware of where God is in your day. How can we see Jesus in those around us, in those Jesus referred to as “the least of these?”*

Author Bio

Steve Loftis is a retired pastor having served small NC Baptist churches over a 30 year span, and is currently a member of First Baptist on Fifth’s choir and Conversations Class.

March 14 | Matthew 17:5-8

Read

“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’”

Reflect

The season of Lent is a good time for shedding. Shedding false assumptions that hinder our walk with God. And the many obvious and subtle ways we attempt to avoid God. In John 4 Jesus is engaged with a Samaritan woman at a well. Their conversation begins innocently enough as Jesus asks her for water to drink. But this request is actually quite radical as it demolishes hard and fast gender and ethnic-religious barriers that have been in place for centuries.

The request opens up a deeply personal, soul-level conversation between the two, and before long Jesus’ observations are hitting dangerously close to home. So the woman seeks to distract Jesus by bringing up an age-old dispute between Jews and Samaritans regarding worship. Samaritans insist the only suitable location for authentic worship is Mount Gerizim at Shechem. Jews believe the temple in Jerusalem is **the** place for worship. This disagreement is an ancient version of a worship war, and the woman wonders where Jesus comes down.

Jesus refuses to take the bait. “The hour is coming, and is now here,” he says, when this worship war will be pointless (aren’t they all?). It’s not where you worship that matters, now that my kingdom is underway. It’s how you worship that matters. “True worshippers,” says Jesus, “will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”

What does that mean?

I believe Jesus is saying that with the aid of the Holy Spirit, we should worship God the same way we are to love him: “with all (our) heart...soul...mind...and strength” (Mark 12:30). Worship without spirit can be lifeless. Worship without truth can be misguided.

Recenter

Respond: *Lent invites us to stop dodging Jesus instead of listening to him, and along the way, shed our one-sided worship!*

Author Bio

David Hughes is husband to Joani, father to three children and four grandchildren, and former pastor of First on Fifth.

March 15 | 1 Samuel 16:4-7

Read

“Samuel did what the Lord commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, ‘Do you come peaceably?’ He said, ‘Peaceably. I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.’ And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, ‘Surely his anointed is now before the Lord.’ But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him, for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.’”

Reflect

In this story from 1 Samuel 16, the prophet Samuel has gone to bless the new king. Seven sons of Jesse each pass before Samuel, all looking the picture of a king, but again and again, Samuel is told by the Lord, this is not the one. People look to outward appearance, but the Lord does not look at things people look at. The Lord looks at the heart.

This beautiful image of God contrasts sharply with God’s commands in 1 Samuel Chapter 15, where the previous king Saul had been commanded by God to “go and attack Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” What about *their* hearts?

Saul did as the Lord commanded except that he kept the Amalekite king alive as well as keeping choice livestock. While historians debate the historicity of the Amalekites, with some thinking they may be a representation of evil as a whole, it is still hard to imagine the killing of children and infants being commanded or desired by God. Yet, Saul had no issues following this command except for killing the king and the best livestock. What would have happened if Saul had spared the children, farmers, families, laborers, immigrants, and weaker ones?

It's hard not to see the world—and the world of scripture—through “the eyes of men.” So much of how we see the world is so carefully taught to us starting at a young age that we don’t even realize the cultural and social expectations we place on others and ourselves and our own prejudices. This is why I am glad to live in The City of the Arts. Artistic expression, especially theatre, has shed light on my own perspectives and prejudices and how I see others. I have learned that this journey will be ongoing. We are all works in progress. Being willing to listen and receive I think is to have a better understanding of the heart and people of God.

Recenter

Reframe: *Where is God leading you right now? What way is God providing? Take a moment to look within or around. What signs of God’s provision do you see?*

Author Bio

Charla Haley-Caudle is a Stokes County native with a Doctorate in Physical Therapy, and a devoted husband and daughter. She only hopes to live up to her cat’s expectations.

March 16 | 1 Samuel 16:10-12

Read

“Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, ‘The Lord has not chosen any of these.’ Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Are all your sons here?’ And he said, ‘There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.’ And Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Send and bring him, for we will not sit down until he comes here.’ He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. The Lord said, ‘Rise and anoint him, for this is the one.’”

Reflect

Have you ever felt like no one sees you? That you are forgotten and any contribution you feel like you’re making doesn’t matter to anyone else? Or maybe you’ve felt that what you are doing today is fine and all, but you feel called to something different or bigger. I know I have felt that way and suspect I’m not alone in that feeling.

Day after day, we plug along in the life God has given us to live. We go to work. We take care of our families. We are kind to strangers. And yet, our hearts long to know that what we are doing matters to someone, or that it is fulfilling our true calling.

In 1 Samuel 16, we read about Samuel coming to Jesse to choose the next King of Israel and Jesse parades all of his sons before Samuel who says none of these are the chosen one. Even in this moment, it seems David’s own father has forgotten him because Samuel had to ask Jesse again if there were more sons. Jesse then told him about the youngest son who was tending sheep and David was brought in to Samuel. Turns out, David was just the young man Samuel was looking for!

Was David wasting his time tending sheep for his family? Was he languishing away in a field somewhere in obscurity? Maybe he felt that way...but the God who sees all and knows all had not forgotten David, even it felt like his own family had. I believe God had David right where he needed to be in preparation for this next big role.

Following David’s example, we can feel confident that when we are faithful in the small things, God will be faithful in leading us to the next step. I’ve heard it said that “the pasture is preparation for the palace.” May it be so for all of us as we serve where God has us planted today and trust His faithfulness for whatever is next.

Recenter

Ponder: Am I serving faithfully where God has me today, even as I wait for what comes next? How might this change my prayer for today?

Author Bio

Holly Kessler is the Director of Community Engagement for Forsyth Jail & Prison Ministries, is married to Jeff, and is a former longtime blogger and podcaster in disguise.

March 17 | Psalm 23:1-3

Read

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.”

Reflect

Last summer, Chris and I had the opportunity to visit Ireland which could be the setting for any Psalm 23 stained glass window in the world. While there, we visited a couple of the many churches St. Patrick established during his 40 years of missionary work on the island. Did you know St. Patrick was not Irish? St. Patrick (ca 387-461 AD) was born in Great Britain, but at the age of 16 he was captured and sold as a slave in Ireland. For the next six years, he was forced to work as a shepherd. When he finally escaped and returned home, he vowed never to return, but a few years later he had a vision of the people of Ireland urging him to return to share with them the mercy and love of Christ. He studied Christianity, became a bishop at the age of 43, and returned to the land of his pagan captors.

The gospel St. Patrick shared with the people of Ireland was not rooted in books, but rather in experience. During six years in captivity, St. Patrick drew close to the Good Shepherd, and he also learned the Irish language and culture. His painful past helped him to convert an entire country to Christianity. Today, St. Patrick’s Day is celebrated around the world with green rivers, massive parades and wild parties. In Ireland, Christians attend church services and Lenten restrictions are lifted for the day in the celebration of this remarkable saint. Have a blessed St. Patrick’s Day!

Recenter

Pray: *Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit,
Christ when I stand,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.*

-St. Patrick

Author Bio

Joy Gambill is an instruction librarian at the WFU Z. Smith Reynolds Library, and a member of the beloved Conversations Class.

March 18 | Psalm 23: 4-6

Read

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

Reflect

Shepherds travel ahead of their flock; as protectors, they must carefully yet quickly identify any dangers that may threaten the lives of the sheep they are bound to protect. As our Shepherd, the Lord paves the way for us, His sheep; through every valley (the low moments in life) and every shadow (where darkness, anxiety, and despair flourish). He is there, leading us through it all with His divine protection.

In these final verses of Psalm 23, David brings the metaphor of the Divine Shepherd—*Jehova Rohi*—to a beautiful culmination, exalting the benevolence of our loving Father who prepares a table before us and anoints us; our cup overflows with the precious blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. Our Holy Father leads us with His staff, but sometimes (as Fathers must), He disciplines us in order to protect us, and yet His rod always comforts us, as we are reminded in Proverbs 3:12: “for the LORD disciplines him whom He loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.”

The sheep may lose sight of their Shepherd and may even give in to the temptation to wander off the path He has prepared for them. Even when we wander, God’s mercy and goodness will follow us—His sheep—all our days and they shall dwell in His house forever. It is, therefore, especially poignant and meaningful that David (who was himself a shepherd of humble origins and was persecuted for most of his life) confidently affirms that he shall fear no evil, for the Lord is with him. For the Word of God says, “The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything.” How blessed are we! How gentle the Shepherd!

Recenter

Ponder: If David could cast his fears aside and trust in the Lord with all his heart, even in the face of the shadows of death, can we stand firm and courageous before God’s promises of protection and find comfort in His corrections? Will we allow ourselves to cast our anxieties onto Him and follow the path He has set out for us?

Author Bio

Day Pinto is member of First of Fifth and a loving follower of Christ, striving to become a better, more faithful servant to her Heavenly Father.

March 19 | Ephesians 5:11-14

Read

“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness; rather, expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly, but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”

Reflect

Years ago, I would co-lead weeklong canoe trips down the Buffalo River in west Tennessee each summer. The beauty of slowly floating down river taking in the cliffs, trees and wildlife engendered awe and amazement. But extended days on the river were also humid and hot, the sun radiating an intensity over the water that could easily test the most experienced paddler. The best trips would span the week of a full moon, for we could rest in the shade of the day and travel after the sun went down when it was cooler and we could see the water. Without the moon, or on an overcast night, we would not even attempt a night float, because not being able to see clearly what was ahead was both foolish and dangerous. We would simply have to travel during the heat of the day.

After setting up camp on a shoal or in a nearby field, I often thought that for most of human history, darkness was a source of fear, uncertainty and anxiety. Wandering in the wilderness after dark put one in immediate danger. Wild predators, adapted to seeing in darkness, could easily attack and even kill. Today, we take light for granted. The convenience of electricity and batteries have dramatically changed our relationship to darkness. Our LED and incandescent lamps have blunted darkness and its ability to conceal and to hide.

Those in the Church at Ephesus knew the terror of darkness and the liberation of light more keenly and immediately. The writer instructs them to have nothing to do with “the fruitless deeds” of darkness, instead turn on the light and make visible that which in darkness is not seen. Lent is a time to reflect on the darkness in our world and in our lives. During the 40 days, we are gifted with light from both the sun and moon. Pure light radiates from the sun and is so powerful that it is reflected at night by the moon. “Everything that is illuminated becomes a light.” We seek to be like the moon, illuminated for the sake of lighting the world.

Summer nights on the Buffalo River taught me another truth about light and darkness, a truth worth reflecting on during Lent. Only when it is dark enough can we see the stars.

Recenter

Refocus: *Where do you see darkness in your life or in our world? Christ shines there too.*

Author Bio

Scott Hudgins is co-chair of the Adult Ministry Team and has been a member along with his spouse, Mary Foskett, since 1998.