

A Word about the Word ***Or...A Logos about the Logos!***

Lovers of Dad-jokes rejoice! Today's word is *word*. Okay, well it's really *logos*, a Greek word, which translated in English means *word*, so close enough, right? Logos, word, whatever you want to call it, is an idea steeped in both the Jewish wisdom tradition and Greek philosophy. Logos is the DNA of the universe – it is the matter, or energy, or umph that organizes all things.

The Word is perhaps most famous or recognizable to us in John's gospel, but we hear about it from the very beginning of our scriptures. The Word is revealed as that creative, parental God in *Genesis* who tames the chaos monster, and lovingly breathes all life into existence. And don't forget about Lady Wisdom, we call her Sophia, too. In Proverbs, Sophia cries out to us; on the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; she even positions herself at the city gates for all to see; "Everyone who has breath: learn prudence, acquire intelligence, and speak noble things."

John's author tells us that the Word, the Logos, the umph of creation has always been with us. But John tells us an even more important word about this Word. Jesus is the Word made flesh – Jesus is the manifestation, the reality, the huggable, the truth-grasping umph for humanity. Whether we come seeking that truth in noon-day heat, or in the cover of darkness, or even at Millbrook on a dreary Sunday morning; all are invited to breathe in the wisdom of God AND infused by God's wisdom, all are invited to be God's breath in the world.

Background

John's is a later gospel – the younger sibling stands out from the crowd. We can date the text to late the First Century, perhaps as late as 100 CE. Its community members are marginalized. They are steeped in a Jewish wisdom tradition, but their belief in Jesus as resurrected Messiah puts them outside of the mainstream of Jewish thought and Temple power structures.

John's prologue (among many other things!) makes it a unique read. Just as Shakespeare foretells the fate of star-crossed lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*, John uses an introduction to frame the narrative that follows. Every piece of the narrative must be viewed through the prologue. Jesus is the Word made flesh, the manifestation of God for humanity. The world will ignore, and ultimately reject God's presence among them. But not everybody will. To those who see and recognize the truth of God's presence, God's communion awaits. As readers, we can follow the trajectory of each character. But we are also invited to become participants in a living story.

Exploring John

John 4:1-15 The Woman at the Well

John 4:1-15 NRSV

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John' — although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 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.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

I’m gonna cheat today. I’m gonna do a second word of the week: *Surface*. Whether you live in First-Century Palestine or Twenty-First Century Raleigh, there’s an assumption that surface levels are deep and impenetrable. Expectations, and systems, and harmful narratives, those things we see on the surface of this world, are a hundred miles wide and an inch deep. I suppose our peripheral vision overwhelms us. A simple boot stomp would offer entry into a deeper, fuller plane, but we are blinded, stunned even, by an endless horizon.

Each one of us has been created, uniquely and wonderfully, by the deep and thoughtful breath of an affectionate, parental God. That foundation beneath us is as lasting, and timeless, and solid as the Earth’s core. And yet somehow, in every age, the systems of this world insist that artificial demographics define our value. They seek to tell us that our race, our ethnicity, our gender, where we live, and how we

choose to worship all have bearing on our ability to recognize and receive the presence of God. The validity of such thinking is as flimsy as plastic wrap, and yet it stretches coast to coast.

When Jesus arrives at the well this morning, he's got to wade through a sea of surface-level nonsense. Jews and Samaritans believed themselves to be wholly incompatible because of who they were descended from, where they lived, and how they worshipped. So divisive and dehumanizing was their treatment of one another, that they deemed one another unclean. They couldn't even share the same vessel to draw water from a well – tainted people taint teacups and teakettles.

When Jesus asks the Samaritan woman, I'm gonna call her Samantha, for a drink of water, he invites her to break this surface-level tension. But it doesn't end there.

Samantha is skeptical; she calls Jesus on his provocative nature: "Why would I want to do that? Just who do you think you are, mister?"

"If only you knew who I was," Jesus says, "You would have all the living water you wanted."

Here's where the idea of surface comes back into play. Samantha assumes Jesus is talking about living well water – this is the water that runs freely or lively well below the surface. This is also the well that Jacob dug for his family. This well is a source of provisions and history.

"So...you don't have a bucket, and you don't follow any kind of social conventions, and you are just all of a sudden gonna dig me a deep and lasting well? Cool. Are you claiming to be greater than our ancestors?"

“This well, Jacob’s well, is one you have to keep coming back to, one where you’ll still be thirsty,” Jesus says. “I’m talking about the kind of water that will never leave you thirsty, that will make your life full.”

Samantha is poking at the surface, but she hasn’t broken through quite yet. “Yes,” she says, “Give me some of that water.” She still thinks Jesus is talking about well water. She is intrigued by the security and comfort of never having to come back to this place to meet her needs.

In three conversational volleys, Jesus is moving Samantha to think about deeper things. She’s willing to break social convention to engage a stranger. She’s willing to investigate what the presence of this stranger might mean. She’s willing to explore her real needs.

The lection ends here, but the story doesn’t. Jesus has set the table to have the first significant theological conversation of John’s gospel. Jesus will unearth Samantha’s need for emotional and spiritual nourishment. Jesus and Samantha will identify the need to prioritize worship rooted in spirit and truth over worship steeped in protocol and tradition. Samantha will open her mind to seeing Jesus as even more than a prophet, but rather, as someone who has told her everything she’s ever done. Samantha will open herself to the possibility, the reality even, of Messiah in her midst. And it shouldn’t be lost on us, that she is so excited, and indeed so quenched of her thirst, that she leaves behind her water vessel. She makes haste to tell the whole village of what she’s seen and heard.

But that’s Samantha’s story. I’m more interested in ours today. Think about your own watering holes. Are there strangers you dare not engage? Think about the sources you depend on so regularly. We have

taps in our kitchens, so we probably don't visit a well, but there are still sources we draw from. Our checking accounts come to mind. If someone invited you into a life of fullness, or richness, or wholeness, or contentedness, where's the first place your mind would go? Do you imagine winning that billion-dollar Power Ball, or is it something more existential?

Jesus invited Samantha into a real conversation. Jesus was interested in knowing the whole Samantha. Her needs. Her past. Her expression of the world. Her heart. Samantha was eager to recognize and receive the power and presence of God in such a moment.

What kind of conversations are we willing to have with one another? How might we draw out the kind of living water that washes away the lifelessness of surface-level resistance? What kind of digging, what kind of talking, what kind of exploring, what kind of listening, what kind of asking are we willing to do to see and experience God's presence for ourselves?

In describing Samantha, our woman at the well, Frederick Buechner writes, "She is transparent, but she does not seem to mind being seen through."

Being transparent means that one's thoughts are easily perceived. That's not such a good thing for poker players, but lucky for us, God's world isn't a game of poker. It's actually a world of love for God and neighbor. You might even say it's a world that values the thoughts and needs of others, because all others have value, no matter their thoughts and needs.

Gospel Talk #5: John
Bob Stillerman
9/1/2024
John 4:1-15



But transparency has a second meaning, too. As a substance, it's something that light can shine through. And I don't know about you, but I sure wouldn't seem to mind God's light shining through me.

Jesus had to go through Samaria. It seems that we do, too. As we make that journey, may we be and meet people who don't seem to mind being transparent.

Amen.