

My favorite TV show is ABC's *Lost*. I think it is a fascinating and intriguing show. I'm pretty sure that some of you have never seen an episode. Maybe some of you started out watching it, but you "lost" interest in it along the way for whatever reason. And some of you are probably like me: you never miss an episode because you want to know what's going to happen next. Who's getting off the island? Who's going to stay? Who are the people on the boat? There's too many questions and not nearly enough answers right now on the show.

*Lost* is a different kind of television show, but at the same time, it uses simple and basic storytelling techniques that are found throughout human history. The really good stories of human history have recurring themes. Themes like black against white, light against darkness, deception & lies vs. truth-telling, dreams vs. reality, fate verses free will, good against evil, isolation compared to community, brokenness, forgiveness, sacrifice. The list of themes could go on and on, but I think, right now, having just listed those three lines of themes, I've probably touched on 90% of all human stories throughout all of history. If any of us have ever read a book, or gone to see a play, or watched television or movies, we know that these themes run throughout all the really good stories we know and love.

Really good stories also tell a big, overarching narrative, and in the midst of that narrative, subplots are developed, smaller stories about secondary characters. So, for example, although a story might be about the hero rescuing the town and getting the girl and riding off into the sunset, usually that story is made even better with some more details. Maybe there's some love triangle. Maybe there's a series of smaller problems that need to be solved before a bigger problem will be fixed at the end. Maybe there's a series of secondary characters who come into the story for a while, and we get enmeshed in their emotions and feelings, and then, for whatever reason, they manage to fall out of the story. Maybe they're killed. Or maybe they just go on down the road, or are left behind, as the big, overarching narrative keeps moving toward its dramatic goal and ending.

The Gospel of John is one of these really good stories from human history. It tells the big, overarching story of Jesus, and it does so using different themes, including several of the ones I listed before. John's Gospel also pulls in different secondary characters who come into the story and highlight these different themes, and then, before we know it, they fade to the background almost as quickly as they appeared. Last week, we were introduced to Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night, in the dark, a key theme in John's gospel, because being

in the dark means not knowing Jesus. Nicodemus lasted all of nine verses in his conversation with Jesus last week before he faded into the night from whence he came. This week, in our gospel lesson, another character comes and has an encounter with Jesus. This character is the Samaritan woman at the well. The contrast between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman is striking. Given the fact that they appear one right after the other in John's Gospel, we are meant to notice the contrasts between them in all of the details. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, an insider, a leader of the Jews. He is a man, he has a name, and he comes to Jesus *by night*. The character to whom we are introduced in this week's text is a Samaritan. Remember, a Samaritan is a religious and political outsider to the Jewish people. Samaritans and Jews typically can't stand each other, because their religious practices are different, even though they both worship the same one true God. This Samaritan is different than Nicodemus not only in religion. There's other significant differences. This Samaritan is a woman. She also has no name. And she meets Jesus at noon, in full daylight.

And the contrast between their conversations with Jesus is even more extraordinary. Nicodemus was unable to move beyond the confines of his religious system when he was talking with Jesus. Nicodemus thought too literally, and asked "What do you mean, you need to be born again? No one can come out of their mother's womb a second time! How can these things be?" and then he leaves. But the Samaritan woman, she moves outside of her religious expectations, and she engages Jesus in theological debate, as she keeps asking questions and making statements. Whereas Nicodemus last week could not hear and understand that Jesus is sent by God, the woman at the well hears and understands the actual name of God. If you take a look at your Celebrate insert, this woman hears the name of God in verse 26, where Jesus says, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." In the original Greek text, that "he" is not there. It just says, "Ego amy," which is "I AM," which is the name of God that God tells Moses in the burning bush: I AM WHO I AM. While Nicodemus's last questioning words to Jesus expose his disbelief as he sneaks away into the night, with that question "How can this be?", the last words of the woman at the well today also pose a question, "He cannot be the Christ, can he?" and she goes around her entire town and describes to everyone what happened at the well, and through her story telling, she and others come to know that Jesus truly is the Savior of the world.

These clear differences between Nicodemus and the woman at the well often cause preachers to whittle down today's gospel story to the point that Jesus comes only for the outsiders of the world. Probably, in

many pulpits around the world today, there are preachers out there who are saying, “Look, this story shows us that Jesus did not come for the important people of the world, like Nicodemus. No, Jesus came for the no-names, the downtrodden, the five-time losers who have to go and get their water during the hottest part of the day. Jesus comes only for the outsiders of this world.” I think that if we were to whittle down the 38 verses of today’s gospel lesson to just this one point, we would have to wonder, could this meeting at the well really be about us, and for us? If we are honest with ourselves, do we truly think that we are outsiders? Are we really the marginalized of society, those who are easily cast aside? If people saw us talking with Jesus, do you think they’d say the same thing that the disciples said about the Samaritan woman? Because, when they saw her talking with Jesus, they said, “Why is he talking to her?” Do you think there’s anyone who says, “Why is Jesus talking with those people from Immanuel? There nothing but a bunch of no good Lutherans.” Are we truly the outsiders of our society?

Perhaps the extraordinary and amazing event of today’s gospel lesson is not simply that Jesus is *for her*, but that she becomes a witness *for him*. The Samaritan woman at the well is not a passive recipient of what Jesus offers to her. She doesn’t say, “Oh, thank you, sir,” and then solemnly and quietly go on her way. She speaks up, asking important questions and challenging things that seem out of place. After Jesus asks for a drink of water, immediately, she recognizes the societal barriers and boundaries that are supposed to keep her in her place, but at the same time, since Jesus crossed the boundary first, she crosses that boundary, too, and she challenges Jesus’ authority over and against the ancestors of the faith, ancestors like Jacob, who dug a well that has lasted for centuries. She might be wondering, “Who does this new guy think he is? Can he do anything that can stand the test of time?”

At first, she is like Nicodemus, a bit skeptical, interpreting Jesus’ words on a literal level, but then she is able to ask for what Jesus has to offer rather than question the possibility. Unlike Nicodemus, she doesn’t ask, “How can these things be, that you having quenching living water?” Instead, as one who walks in the light, she wants to know more, and so she says, “Give me this water.”

Throughout most of the story, she is not 100% certain that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Verse 29 today shows us her uncertainty. She asks, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” The way that it’s written in Greek, the assumed automatic answer to that question is no. Her question there implies that she hasn’t fully

bought into the idea yet, but she does not let that stop her from leaving behind her water jar, going into the city, and inviting everyone to come and have their own encounter with Jesus. This woman demonstrates what can happen when we actually engage in conversation and questions about our faith. Like I said last week, faith is not a noun in the Bible. Faith is not a possession to be set on the shelf. In the stories of the Bible, faith is a verb, a believing that is put into action. The woman at the well shows us that faith is about having an active dialogue, about talking with God and about God and listening to God, such that we are open to growth and change. It is not about having all the answers. If we think we have all the answers, if we are content with our theological and doctrinal constructs, if we believe more in our own convictions than the possibility of God's revelation, we will be left to ponder whether or not God will choose to be made known, whether or not our living and active God has a say in what's going on in our lives. If we are waiting to have all the answers, we probably will be waiting quite a while. And while we're waiting, we're going to be wondering when and if we ever will finally feel confident enough, secure enough, and knowledgeable enough, to invite others to "come and see." When it comes down to it, we will be forced to admit how many times we have overlooked opportunities for giving testimony about the Savior of the world, satisfied to say that "Well, Jesus is for me," and thinking that that is enough.

The Samaritan woman at the well is an example for us, not as one who claims "Jesus is for me, too," but as one who labors to help bring in the harvest for God. She responds to Jesus in such a way that Jesus reveals his true identity to her, and in doing so, her own identity evolves. We learn from the Samaritan woman that in our own encounter with Jesus, not only are we changed, but that which God will reveal to us will change as well.

When we are baptized, we are baptized into living waters. And as Jesus says today, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Baptism changes our identity into one who is a follower of Christ, a beloved child of God, who doesn't just stop there, but who goes out into the world, gushing out this living water like a spring to others, so that no one in the world might be dried up and thirsty, but instead, so that all may drink in the love, forgiveness, and eternal life that God offers. Praise and thanks be to God for this gift of living water. Amen