

When I was in sixth grade, every time I made a mistake in my homework book, I would rip out the page and start with a clean one. Eventually the book would fall apart as a result of many mistakes, and I would rip it in half and hide it in the bottom of the garbage can and get a new one. Eventually I was found out by the principal and she invited me into her office, and said, “Karen, I want to have a word with you” She handed me all my discarded exercise books, gave me a roll of scotch tape and asked me to tape together all the ripped pages and not get a new book till all of these were completely filled. And then she quietly said, “Of course I expect not to find anymore of your books in the garbage”. She had a word with me, and I still remember it to this day because she successfully curbed my need for a perfect book.

A couple of weeks ago I looked up the lectionary texts for today, and I thought, “great, the first time I preach at Emmanuel, and right now I hate these texts – especially the passage from Exodus and the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Not that I didn’t have a choice – I could have preached from another text – but it’s against my principles to throw it out because I hate it – so I thought, “well, I will just have to have a word with the Bible”!

The reason I didn’t like either the passage from Exodus or from the Gospel of John was that I immediately empathized with both the **thirsty** Israelites in the wilderness and the **Samaritan woman** who had her sexual secrets dragged into view. I guess this might be considered one of the occupational hazards of a community minister – to empathize with the needs of the people without the power and without the authority to determine what right solution or the right answer is or even how it is they should be publicly characterized.

After being rescued from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites found themselves in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. In Marah, they were thirsty and the waters were bitter (15:22-7); then they hungry and without food (ch 16); and now in our passage for today, they are thirsty without water in sight. It is true that in each of these cases **God did provide** – first he made the bitter waters drinkable, then he provided manna and quail, and finally God, with the help of Moses made water run out of the rock, and their thirst was satisfied. So, you might ask, why do I need to have a word with the Bible? **Isn’t it obvious that God is good?**

The problem for me is that when the people grumbled about their thirst, that grumbling was characterized as rebellion. In fact, the place of the rock of Horeb was named Massah and Meribah because “the Israelites **quarreled** and **tested** the Lord saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” A question many of us might ask when we are in dire need. The Deuteronomist (Deut. 9:22), reports that even at the place where the rock was struck, “[the people of Israel] provoked the Lord to wrath, and the Lord was so angry with [them] that he was ready to destroy [them]”. The people, because they were thirsty, and complained about that thirst are characterized as ‘testing’ God, as “disobeying’ God, as not trusting God -- and God is so angry at their complaints that he wants to destroy them. When the spies returned from their reconnaissance mission to Canaan, they told the people of Israel: “we are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than

we”. Now, I have never fought in a war, but I can truly imagine that my terror would be over the roof. Yet, In Numbers 14:11, the Lord sees this as their lack of belief in God’s goodness and responds with anger: “I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them”

I work in a neighbourhood where many people do not have enough food to eat because they do not have enough income, and because their housing (often substandard) is unaffordable. I cannot imagine telling them to passively trust that God will provide, and if they didn’t have that trust – talking about them as grumbling and rebellious. I want, instead, to encourage anger and wailing – yours and mine so that it energizes us enough to protest, to join together to get the word out there that this situation didn’t come into their lives because they didn’t make a good enough budget, or weren’t willing to work, or frittered away all that they had on things we middle class folks take for granted as essential to our lives. **So, what do I do with this text?**

Then I turned to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. And I didn’t like it either because the unnamed woman is presented as somewhat ignorant, sexually suspect, and worshipping what “she does not know” in contrast to the Jews who worship what they know, and from whom salvation will come. She is Samaritan; in this story the ethnic ‘other’ but she did have her own religious beliefs, her own temple, and her own religious text. What I liked even less was how many biblical interpreters followed the narrator of this story right along the path of making the woman, in my view, simply into an object – and a culturally slurred one in order to affirm Jesus as Messiah, bringer of salvation from the Jews.

I work in a neighbourhood where people come together from many different religious and non-religious backgrounds, and those who would call themselves Christian – from a diversity of denominations associated with different cultural groups. I cannot imagine that a respectful response would be to go into a religious community, and tell them that “they worship what they don’t know” while I “worship what I know” (as Jesus said to the Samaritan woman). How can this be a text of liberation - of Jesus transgressing ethnic boundaries when the woman doesn’t even have a name in this story? He approaches her in midday – not supposed to talk to a woman like that – doesn’t he put her at risk when he does that? Then he asks her about her marital status, and uses her honest answer as an opening to reveal her five ex-husbands and her present non-marital relationship. Korean scholar, Jean K. Kim has written a book entitled, “Woman and Nation: An Intercontextual Reading of the Gospel of John from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective”, and she begins her reading of this story with the apt quote: “In a nationalist discourse, the “hybrid” woman (either a woman of mixed descent or one who has married to another ethnic group becomes the agent of cultural bastardization and is posited as a sexually promiscuous woman” (p. 90). And when biblical interpreters get a hold of this woman, Jesus’ metaphorical language of ‘living water’ and her insistence on remaining with the water at hand just becomes a way to make her look ignorant as well.

When I read this text, I think the unnamed Samaritan woman represents the cultural stereotype of the Samaritans from the Judean perspective. After the ten tribes of the

Northern Kingdom of Israel were defeated and taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BCE (2 Kings 17:24), five of these nations were relocated in the cities of Samaria, and these immigrants intermarried and mingled with the Israelites there who were left behind when others were carried off to captivity in Babylon. The Samaritans developed an intermingling theology of their own – Jacob was their ancestor, they had their own version of the Pentateuch and they worshipped on Mt Gerazim. In the Samaritan Chronicles – Samaritans are portrayed as the “true Israel”. But, of course, that is from the Samaritan point of view. From the Judean point of view, Josephus, for instance, portrays Samaritans as self-serving -- hiding people who were accused of breaking the law. From Jesus’ perspective, “salvation comes from the Jews” (from himself) not from the Messiah the Samaritans are still waiting for. Some scholars have suggested that Samaritans are, in fact, a group within Judaism, but some ancient Jews disagreed, and considered them “half-converts”. I am actually saddened by the ending of the Gospel story because the woman appears to be successfully colonized, and manipulated by the patriarchal and nationalist ideology of John’s narrative. **So, what do I do with this text?**

And how is it helpful to have this kind of reading in chapel? Isn’t this better left as the stuff for a biblical studies class? I don’t know if I want to have a word with the Bible, or I want to have a word with God and with God and Christ. It seems safer to want that word with the Bible. Yet, I was speaking at *Texts that Hurt* on Monday night along with a Jewish brother, and he was telling me that he, as a Jew is encouraged to argue with God – he told me the Jewish story of how the moon and the sun argued with God, and how God changed God’s mind because of that. There are even stories in the Bible of God changing God’s mind, of God repenting. So if I were to grumble with God about this text, I would want to say to God – why do you expect instant trust? Why do you demonize people for their lack of it, and threaten to harm them when they are scared?

In the case of the Samaritan woman, I would say to the writer of the Gospel of John – Stop portraying Jesus as disrespectful to ethnic and religious difference. You do not need to affirm his importance on the back of this woman. It makes me wonder about this so-called inclusive vision of joint worship if it is simply another case of one ethnic group being rolled into the vision of another. And if I were to have a word with Jesus, I would ask him why he couldn’t have invited the woman to come to know him as Messiah in a less patronizing, colonizing kind of way.

It is good news that God does provide. Jesus does teach us the good news that we can transcend religious boundaries. So why would I read it like this? Because thirst and hunger and death because of a disgusting level of poverty both in our own country and around the world is relentlessly present. Because the religious-based violence and war, and the discrimination that newcomers face in our country, because of the racism that people experience, because of the conflict between different ethnic and cultural groups is relentlessly destroying us. I wonder if I am still looking for the perfect book – trying to blot out the problems. But I wonder, “If we are not prepared to argue with God and God in Christ and with our sacred scriptures”, we will, I believe, inadvertently continue to reproduce an apathy toward human need and a failure to grapple with joining together without squashing human diversity. Just look at how our readings of the Gospel of John

have produced so many anti-Semitic readings. The way to Resurrection is not easy – we must read with our eyes fully open, read with courage, and with a willingness to give up our religious security blankets and to lose our religious life to save it. The world is watching. Perhaps the good news is that God is still patiently waiting for us to begin to argue more with God, with God in Jesus and for us to “have a word with the Bible” so God can have a different Word with us.