

3 Lent Year A

Lections: Exod. 17:1-7; Ps. 95; Rom. 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

In the name of the One, Holy, and Living God.

Good morning Grace Church. What a joy it is to preach with you on one of my favorite stories about Jesus.

First, a word about names. As we know, the Gospels are foremost narratives about the life of Jesus. So, all of the other people we read about in the Gospels are in some sense characters used by the ancient evangelists to teach us something about Jesus. Sometimes, those characters are major and recurring, such as Peter or Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Sometimes we hear about minor characters, who quickly appear and then disappear from the scene, some named and some anonymous. Often, those without names are meant as stand-ins or representatives for groups of people who respond to Jesus in different ways, both in the evangelists' own time and for us nearly 2000 years later.

Such is the case for this unnamed woman at Jacob's Well, who perhaps represented a Samaritan faction of the Christian community John writes for.¹ But her story, told only in this portion of John's Gospel, so inspired the early church that they would give her the name Photini, which means in Greek, "the luminous one."² Photini has been venerated as a saint by Eastern Orthodox churches for a very long time and since 2018, she has been included by that name on the Episcopal Church's liturgical calendar with a feast date of February 26.

And it is no surprise why Photini would be venerated for what her faith, her trust in Jesus, shows us. But, we need to do a little excavating to understand just how radical this encounter between Jesus and Photini is.

Before I was ordained a deacon in 2019, I went on a pre-ordination retreat at the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge. There, one of the monks, I think it was Br. James Koester, offered us ordinands some reflections on Photini. He pointed out that a 1st-century audience would have quickly understood the depths of her marginalization and would have been awestruck at how Jesus engaged with her.

It starts in the first two sentences. First, is the physical setting of Samaria. As the reading mentions, Jews and Samaritans did not share things in common, meaning they had a mutual hostility dating back centuries. It is also an ironic statement, because Jews and Samaritans actually had *a lot* in common. They both claimed descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They both claimed to worship Yahweh, the one true God. They both revered Moses and adhered to the Torah, the law of Moses. And they both awaited the coming of a Messiah to save them.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-45-42-3>

² <http://satucket.com/lectionary/photini.html>

Yet, they were also hypersensitive to what divided them. Religiously, Jews, including Jesus and his disciples, were raised to believe that Mount Zion on Jerusalem was the holiest place on earth, where God dwelled in the Temple. Samaritans worshiped the same God on Mount Gerizim, which loomed over Jacob's Well and the town of Sychar. They were also divided by lingering memories of war, including Jewish occupation in 164 B.C. and destruction of the Samaritan temple on their holy mountain. In Jesus's day, Samaritans were outnumbered and surrounded on three sides by Jewish people.

As if that political, ethnic, and religious distance between them weren't enough, Jesus meets Photini when she comes to draw water from the well at noon. Br. James told us that this would have also been something to pique an ancient audience's attention. While women had the traditional job of drawing water, they usually did so as a group, for safety and for companionship. They usually did so early in the morning or in the evening to avoid the heat of the day.³ But Photini comes alone, when the sun is at its height. Why?

Well, the answer may be hiding in their repartee about Photini's five husbands. The traditional interpretation of Photini's multiple marriages, originating from and perpetuated by men, I would note, insinuated that she was an adulteress. But that interpretation ignores the reality of how difficult it would be for Photini to divorce and remarry.

So, Br. James pointed out a different passage from Scripture that might shed some light on what's really going on here. In the other three Gospels, we get a story where some Jewish teachers and rulers called the Sadducees pose a hypothetical question to Jesus about a woman who marries seven men, all brothers, one after the other, after each one dies, in order to fulfill one of the laws of Moses. This practice was called levirate marriage, and it was intended to protect women and keep inheritances within one family.

Br. James offered that Photini and her husbands might be a real case of what levirate marriage was in practice. Photini is assumed to be barren, for there is no mention of her children joining her at the well or waiting for her in town. Perhaps she was also thought to be cursed, having five husbands, all brothers, die after marrying her, and a sixth brother who took her into her home but out of fear of her barrenness and that marrying her might lead to his death, refuses to marry her. This leaves her economically precarious and interpersonally outcast. This is why she draws water alone at noontime, in order to avoid the whispers and gossip of her neighbors.

And it is this woman, Photini, colonized by empire, marginalized because of her gender, a scandal to her family, friendless and alone, that Jesus meets as an equal, as someone worthy to engage in a spiritual dialogue. And despite her status, despite what is whispered behind her back, despite all the trials and tragedies life has thrown at her, or maybe, because of those things, Photini clings to her faith: "I know that Messiah is coming," she says, "I trust that God will keep Their promises."

And in response, Jesus reveals another vulnerable layer to gain her trust and ours. "I am," he says, a direct echo of Yahweh's revelation to Moses in the burning bush. "I am Messiah and I am God. I see you, I respect you, and I love you."

³ See Gen. 24:10-20, the story of Rebecca at the well.

Oh church, what a story!

I am sometimes asked why I remain a Christian, a faith that colonized my indigenous ancestors, a religion that has been the number-one enemy of queer and trans people for millennia, and now one that is more associated with hypocrites and would-be tyrants than love and justice. Why do I stay?

I stay because of stories like Photini's. I stay because in prayer, in Scripture, at this Table, and in service to others I also find a Messiah who knows everything about me, everything I have done, especially what I have had to do in response to the unjust circumstances of my life. And Jesus doesn't just know me, he lifts my downcast face, he looks at me with such love, and he gives me living water to drink.

And what he does for me, he offers to each of us. May we all be as brave as Photini and take Jesus at his word, so that we and our world may have abundant life. Amen.