John 4:1-26 September 25, 2011

Two Sundays ago we began a sermon series on *The Five Practices of Fruitful Living,* based on the book by bishop Robert Schnase. Using the story of the woman caught in adultery, pastor Christine encouraged us to say *yes* to God's unconditional love and to live as people transformed by love.

Schnase defines the second practice of fruitful living as **worship**, and so the task fell to me this morning to preach on the importance of practicing passionate worship. There was just one tiny problem with my assignment: you already do. You could be at home right now sipping coffee and reading the newspaper, but here you are, dressed in your Sunday best, singing your hearts out and lifting your voices in praise. I *could* stand up here and lecture you on the value of faithfully attending worship, but clearly that's a sermon you don't need.

Do you know what I learned pretty quickly in the past few weeks? That the tricky thing about trying to write a sermon about worship is that, sooner or later, you're going to have answer the question: what IS worship?

"Worship" is one of our favorite "church words". It's a word we love to use in a spiritual or church context as if we knew what it meant, and as if we expected each other to know what it means. It's one of those words that sometimes functions like a secret handshake among church-going Christians. But I think when we are honest with ourselves, we might admit that we don't quite know what it means to worship God. What *is* our act of worship? What does God want us to *do* when we worship? And what, exactly, are we supposed to *say* to the God of the universe?

I'll be the first to admit that when it comes to worship, I have more questions than answers. But at least I'm not the only one. The Gospels are full of characters looking for answers, and the Samaritan woman in the fourth chapter of John has even more questions – and comments – than most.

I sympathize deeply with the Samaritan woman because she has so much to say to Jesus, so many probing, impertinent questions. In the Gospels, Jesus is quite fond of saying things that no one can understand, and I love the Samaritan woman for not letting him get away with it. To each of Jesus's vague spiritual pronouncements, the Samaritan woman has a comment, a question, or a quick retort. She fires off her questions one by one and for once, Jesus can hardly get a word in edgewise.

Listen to some of her comments: "How is it that you, a Jew, can ask me for a drink?" "You have no bucket – and that well is deep." "Where do you get that living water?" "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?" "Give me this water!" (And those are just the comments that made it through the editing cuts and into the recorded Gospel! I wonder what else she might have said?)

When Jesus turns out to know a thing or two about the Samaritan woman's personal life – namely, the fact that she's had five husbands and has already taken her next lover, who is *not* her husband – she puts two and two together and realizes she's in the presence of some kind of prophet. She doesn't know who this man is, but he seems to know *her*.

In the same way that we would expect a woman working the red-light district to be reluctant to enter into conversation with a priest, we expect the Samaritan woman to be self-conscious about speaking with Jesus. It's amazing that this conversation takes place at all: her racial, social and religious status are enough to prevent them from speaking to each other. But that's doesn't seem to bother her – she just keeps shooting off questions.

The Samaritan woman, who recognizes a prophet when she sees one, thinks, *great! I can finally get some satisfying answers!* One of the questions she asks Jesus is the burning religious question of the day. It's a question about the correct location for worship: is it on the mountain in Samaria, or in Jerusalem?

Her hard line of questioning is not unfamiliar to us, because we have a few burning questions of our own - questions we've been lining up to fire at Jesus whenever he might show up at our watering holes and give us half a second's chance. Questions about

worship – and a whole host of other things. What is worship? *How* should we worship? Actually, Jesus, while we're on the subject – how do we *live*?

Jesus answers. *"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."*

If the Samaritan woman is hoping for a straight answer, she doesn't get one. Jesus's answer is theologically dense and, honestly, it's confusing. What bewilders me about this passage is that Jesus gives the woman an answer that she is almost sure to *not* understand. She's not a scholar or a Pharisee, she's a woman of ancient Samaria and therefore almost surely uneducated. Why the complex theology?

And she doesn't get it, as her response makes clear. She only says, "the Messiah is coming, who is called Christ. When he comes, he will proclaim all things for us." In other words, "When the *real* Messiah comes, we'll finally have some *answers*. *Clear* answers*."* I have to admit that I *love* this woman's response, and I love it because I think it contains a hint of criticism.

To which Jesus has *another* answer, and this one is utterly, breathtakingly simple.

Jesus says, "I AM is speaking to you."

Jesus says I AM using the words that God used in the Hebrew Bible. I AM means I am Yahweh, the one true, living and holy God.

Jesus says I AM to mean, you have come face to face with the Messiah, the Son of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

I AM.

The Samaritan woman had a theoretical question about the proper location of Jewish worship - and suddenly hears a voice in front of her saying, I AM. She really just wanted to know *about* worship, just to get the record straight - and instead she has an encounter with the Son of the living God. She wanted specific instructions, a how-to guide to proper worship - but she encounters a living mystery, a God of endless surprises who never gives us the answers we expect.

To this, finally, the Samaritan woman has no response. She is speechless. The loose-living, loose-lipped woman with a sharp answer to everything is awed to silence. She drops her water jug and walks away.

The poor Samaritan woman. Poor us! We so want to think that there are 10 easy steps to true worship (true prayer, true discipleship). If only we knew the answers, we think, we could get a handle on this "worship" thing and do it "correctly". The Samaritan woman is not alone in discovering that there is no way to plan for the God of surprises. There are no rules, no definitions, no guarantees. In the end, there is no adequate way to prepare for an encounter with the living God: we can only brace ourselves for the experience and hope to live to tell about it.

And then: one day, not in the temple in Jerusalem *or* on the holy mountain in Samaria, but just one ordinary seeming day, when we're going about our business - drawing water from the well, eating our lunch, commuting to the office, whatever – God arrives. And there he is: not even an arm's reach away. I AM. I AM who evades definition, who cannot be wrestled into submission, whose presence stuns us into silence. We drop our water jugs and run. What other response is there?

In the grand scheme of things, the Samaritan woman could probably consider herself lucky. When Moses came down from the mountain after his worship experience, he was glowing so brightly he had to veil his face. Jacob limped away from God with a dislocated hip. When Elijah encounters God from the mouth of a cave, he has to put his cloak over his face because he cannot bear it. All the prophet Isaiah could manage to say in God's presence was "oh woe! oh woe!".

The biblical characters who are lucky enough to walk away alive and unharmed from an encounter with the living God don't find words to record their experience. They are struck dumb, or they cry out for mercy. They glow in the dark like radioactive material. Speech fails them. They drop their water jugs and run.

When the Son of God reveals his identity to the Samaritan woman, it's for the first time in the gospel of John. It's a staggering revelation – and it happens under the midday sun in a small town in Samaria, and the only audience there to see it is a socially outcast woman from the wrong side of the tracks, a woman with a shady past and a sarcastic tongue.

Why? Why her? Why the Samaritan woman? Let's listen to the Samaritan woman as she explains it herself: she tells us that "our ancestor Jacob gave us this well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it." Ancestor Jacob. Yes, the ancestor Jacob who wrestled with God on the banks of the Jabbok river and refused to let go until God blessed him. He named that place Peniel because there he saw the face of God.

So when the Samaritan woman calls herself a descendant of Jacob, she isn't kidding. She doesn't take on Jesus physically, but her relentless questioning and tireless search for answers are the oral equivalent of a wrestling match with God. The Samaritan woman doesn't let her status as a political, religious and sexual outsider prevent her from wrestling with questions of faith and refusing to let go until her God gives her her answers.

Does she get the answer she's expecting? Well, no. If fact, there is not the slightest hint in the text that she understands a single word of Jesus's complex theological answer.

But she sees the face of God.

We Samaritan women are restless with questions, looking everywhere for answers – and we're still waiting for a prophet to tell us how to worship and how to live.

But instead of a book of answers we have a God of unfathomable mysteries: a God whose answer to our probing questions is a simple, earth-shattering "I AM".

Let us pray.

God of surprises,
God who is too large for our wildest imaginations,
God who dodges our questions and refuses to be pinned down:
We pray in all boldness that we will not let you go.
Make us sons of Jacob and daughters of the Samaritan woman,
Courageous enough to hang on to you
Until we receive your blessing and see your face.
Amen.

BLESSING

The God we worship is never confined to this holy place.
So go and travel with the God
who is found in ordinary and surprising places.
Go into the world God loves so much
and bear the fruit of love.