

# Where in the World is God?

John 4:5-42

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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March 15, 2020/3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

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It has been a crazy and unsettling week. Watching the effects of the COVID-19 virus in Canada—cancellations, travel recommendations, warnings, constant updates, etc.—has at times felt like watching dominoes fall.

It has been a week of uncertainty, confusion, and even a measure of panic in some circles.

But in the midst of all this, we want to hear a word from the Lord. My sermon plans obviously changed throughout the course of the week, but I'm still going to be focusing on the originally planned text, John 4 and the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well.

I was speaking with an Anglican colleague on Thursday after the Lenten lunch at our church and we were talking about how we were going to approach this text this week.

There is no shortage of options. I could talk about Jesus as the boundary crosser, how in speaking not only with a woman but a *Samaritan* woman, Jesus was violating norms and demonstrating that God's saving love and concern extended far beyond assumed divisions.

I could look about the woman's history and how Jesus draws this out in the course of the conversation. I could talk about why the woman would have been there alone in the heat of midday (probably due to social shame and ostracization), about the vulnerability of a woman who had had five husbands (had her previous husbands died? Or just kicked her to the curb?), about how women had no power to divorce and yet men could divorce a woman for any reason at all. I could talk about how *this* woman became the first missionary to the Gentiles.

I could talk about her awe-struck statement "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did"—about how this was not a source of shame or guilt, but of comfort, acceptance, and challenge. I could talk about the implication of this statement—*This man knows me as I am, including the ugly parts, and he still offers me life.*

I could talk about the connections to the story of Nicodemus from the previous chapter (which we talked about last week). A Jewish man comes to Jesus in the secrecy of night. Jesus comes to a Samaritan woman in the exposed light of day. Both are seeking life in their own unique ways and Jesus meets them where they are. I could talk, again, about how Jesus completely upends cultural norms and expectations to search out the lost and the broken, whether they're religious elites or marginalized foreign women.

In the end, though, I decided to focus on two parts of this passage.

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### **Living water and spiritual food**

In Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, it takes her a long time to figure out that he's talking about water metaphorically. She's initially focused on the logistics of drawing from the well and about where the water will come from.

Even when Jesus talks about the water welling up from within to eternal life, she responds by saying, "Well, give me this water again, because I'm tired of being thirsty and having to walk all the way out to this well!"

Later, in Jesus' conversation with his disciples who had returned from buying food, they also struggle to track with Jesus when he talks about food.

The disciples urge him to eat something and Jesus says he has food to eat that they know nothing about. They're confused. Where did Jesus get this food? Did someone bring it to him?

And then Jesus responds, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 5:34). He was speaking not of physical food, but the spiritual food of his mission.

And we know, of course, what this means. Jesus' work was to proclaim the kingdom, to cast out demons, heal the sick, preach peace, and ultimately to give his life for the sin of the world and to be raised from the dead as the firstborn of the new creation.

Living water. Spiritual food.

The Samaritan woman and the disciples both missed this, at least initially. They were so preoccupied with physical needs that they didn't understand that Jesus was talking about a completely different kind of hunger and thirst.

I wonder if the same is true of us sometimes.

This global pandemic has caused massive anxiety. We are preoccupied with our physical needs, with our health, security, safety. People are panic buying at grocery stores, trying to stock up for an indefinite period of time.

And this is understandable, on one level. We cannot help but focus on our physical needs.

But human beings have needs that go far beyond the physical. We not just physical creatures but spiritual ones as well.

It is often times of crisis that remind us of this, whether it's the death of a loved one or a period of suffering, or something like a global pandemic.

As an article in Christianity Today about how the church in Singapore is coping with COVID-19 highlights this:

Headlines that regularly ratchet up the local and global death counts are daily reminders of our mortality, forcing everyone to look beyond the routines of life and to consider what lies beyond. *Memento mori*; we all will someday die, by COVID-19 or otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

And so, can we hear Jesus' words to a Samaritan woman and to his disciples addressed to us?

Can we hear them as a call to pay attention to the state of our thirst and hunger? Are these confined to this life alone? Or do our souls yearn and long for the future that God promises?

Do we long to be known as the Samaritan woman was, to have our lives laid bare before the one who knows us truly and love us fully?

Can we embrace Jesus' call to open our eyes and pay attention to the fields where God's kingdom is advancing—a kingdom where we don't live by bread alone, but are sustained by the word and the promise of God?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/7-lessons-covid-19-coronavirus-churches-singapore-us-europe.html>

None of this is to denigrate physical needs. Jesus was human and he entered fully into the human experience. He experiences physical thirst and hunger in this passage.

Jesus touched bodies, healed bodies, loved bodies.

God cares about embodied human physical life. God cares about people who are infected and communities that are struggling.

But we were created for more than physical life. We were created for union with God.

Perhaps these next weeks and months where we are increasingly made aware of the fragility of life, of economic systems and political structures, and of communities can serve as a reminder of these things.

We were created for life, both now *and* in the age to come.

### **Where is God?<sup>2</sup>**

The second thing I want to talk about finds its origin in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman about, of all things, mountains.

“Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Most people who read these words find them a little bit odd. The woman seems to be trying to divert the conversation away from the details of her relationship history and toward an age-old religious controversy.

One minute we’re talking about how many husbands this woman has had, the next minute we’re talking about mountains—specifically which mountain God is to be found on?

One minute we’re in the middle of an excavation of this woman’s past, the next minute we’re engaged in a centuries-old debate on religious geography.

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<sup>2</sup> The first part of this section (the analysis of the discussion between Jesus and the woman about the “availability of God”) is reproduced with permission from a sermon delivered by Gil Dueck, July 12, 2009 at Neighbourhood (MB) Church, Nanaimo, BC.

What's going on?

Well, the woman's reference to "this mountain" refers to Mount Gerizim, the mountain that the Samaritans believed to be consecrated for the worship of God. This mountain would have been in full view of Jesus and the woman as they talked.

Many Samaritans believed it to be the site of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac. The Samaritans had also built a rival temple here around 400 years before the time of Christ.

We often have a very difficult time appreciating how much *places* matter to people in the Bible.

We find the idea of God inhabiting a certain place somewhat odd. If someone today asks the question, "Where is God?" we tend to interpret that as describing a person's "sense or awareness of God's presence."

We don't usually mean that God inhabits some places more than others. We don't mean that God is actually located somewhere.

But for Jews and Samaritans, God was not just an invisible "God in heaven," God was not just an omnipresent Spirit who was somehow everywhere at the same time.

For Jews and Samaritans God had a very particular address. If you were a Jew, God lived on the temple mountain in Jerusalem. If you were a Samaritan, God lived on Mt Gerizim.

So, these two mountains, in the context of a conversation between a Jew and a Samaritan, were code for the controversy over where God lived.

### **Where God was available?**

Which people had it right? Which people were chosen by God? The Samaritans or the Jews? Gerizim or Jerusalem.

Jesus responds by saying that a time is coming when true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth.

Jesus seems to be calling all of the things this woman assumes into question. Something has changed in his coming, somehow the old questions don't matter in the same way anymore.

The hour is at hand where neither of these mountains will be the place where she should look, if she's looking for God.

Jesus is saying that the time has come where God's "availability" extends beyond these two mountains, beyond the tribal rivalries of Jews and Samaritans, beyond the political fortunes of one nation.

Instead, the God who created and loved the entire world is once again available to the whole world. The God who had been seen primarily through the national story of Israel is now opening up the doors to all people in all places.

Instead of two holy mountains, Jesus opens the door up to a "holy world" where God is available to all who seek him in Spirit and in truth.

The question, "Where is God?" was a geographical and an ethnic one for the woman at the well. But of course, it's an existential one as well.

Where is God? is a question that people often ask when bad things are happening in the world.

Where is God when things fall apart?

Colossians 1:17 says that in Christ all things hold together, but we often resonate more with Yeats than the Apostle Paul.

*Things fall apart, the center cannot hold...*

I've been thinking a lot about this question of where God is this week. On Thursday afternoon, as soon as the Lenten lunch was over, Claire phoned. She was worried about COVID-19, about some friends who were experiencing hard things.

She was asking the natural question that people often ask: *Where is God in all this?*

Where *is* God? In the midst of COVID-19, but also in the midst of refugee crises and homelessness and the opioid crisis and mental health challenges and just the ordinary pain of life on this planet?

Where in the world is God?

So often it seems like we expect God to come from somewhere else—wherever it is that God ordinarily hangs his hat—into the world of our experience.

The implicit assumption is that God is “out there” when what we would desperately like is for him to come “in here” for a while and do a bit of tinkering with the system, perform a bit of reparative therapy in our world and in our lives.

This is how I thought of God when I was a kid. I would dare God to prove himself to me—if God could just do something that couldn’t be explained in any other way, I would be his forever.

Move that obstacle. Help me find that lost item. Make it sunny when I want to play outside. Get me that A in math class (this would have been a heroic task even for the God of the universe!).

*If you will just arrange things in the way I would like them this one time, you’ll have such an enthusiastic disciple, dear God!*

I sometimes wonder how much any of us progress from this understanding of God.

The question “Where is God?” is often really just a variation of “Why is life so hard and confusing?” or “Why is faith sometimes difficult?” or “God, why can’t you be more obvious?”

**But what if, rather than looking for a God “out there” to come “in here,” we probed the nature and character of what gives “in here” its shape in the first place?**

What if, rather than as an absentee landlord who periodically makes an appearance when things deteriorate sufficiently, we were to see God as underneath, around, within, and beyond?

What if we were to see God not as the Being whose existence or usefulness is questioned when things get scary and hard, but as the very foundation for so much of what makes life livable, meaningful, heartbreaking, glorious, and hopeful in the first place?

I think there are four areas that leap to mind that point toward God as the very ground of all that is.

**Truth.** We take for granted, I think, that our brains are capable of thinking and of arriving at conclusions that represent an external reality in comprehensive and satisfying ways.

We assume that truth does and should matter to us when, strictly speaking, if there is no God and it's all only physical stuff that is the product of time plus chance, all that should conceivably matter to us would be adaptive utility. But we have a hunger for the truth. We want to know what is real and to arrange our lives accordingly.

**Beauty.** We are frequently moved beyond words by the staggering beauty that our world exhibits. A paddle on the ocean while the sun is setting. A motorcycle ride through the Rockies. A human being that takes our breath away. A painting that speaks to us in ways that words never could.

On one level, these are just sensory impressions—colours, textures, shades and shapes—but these sensory impressions are somehow able to convey meaning and evoke some of our deepest emotions.

The world seems to be *saying* something, and our reactions to beautiful things, however feeble and inadequate, give evidence to the fact that we have a hunger to listen.

**Love.** At some level, we know that this is what we are made for. When love is absent, we chase after it, often in incalculably destructive ways. When love is present, we cling to it.

Every terrible pop song, every lame romantic comedy, every “I do,” every baby born, every tenacious clinging to a relationship that teeters on the precipice, every act of self-giving, every unmerited kindness, every waiting in the darkness, every bandaged wound on the side of the road, every weeping at the gate when the prodigal comes home, every taste of bread and wine.

All of these bear witness—sometimes eloquent, sometimes partial—that we were made for love. Love is where we come from. Love is what beckons us forward. Love is divine.

**Suffering.** It might seem strange to even include this one, much less put it at the end. Surely love should be the final word!

But it is times like the present when we are reminded of the inherent fragility of life.

And I am convinced that suffering and struggle and weakness also bear a kind of witness to God if only because as Christians we are children of a God who suffered and who suffers still alongside his groaning creation, a God who has used apparently weakness and foolishness to redeem the world.

Suffering reminds us that the story is not yet finished.

And our reaction to times when things seem to be falling apart (globally or personally) bears witness to our firm and undying conviction that suffering does not belong and the hope of a world where all things are put right.

Suffering can intensify our longing for the living water and the bread of heaven that feeds and heals our souls.

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So, where in the world is God?

Well, God is *in the world*.

God is in all that makes and breaks us, all that moves and molds us, all that raises us up and, yes, even in all that we suffer.

God is the one in whom we live, move, and have our being (Acts 17:28).

God is not somewhere out there looking for an invitation to access in here. God is not asleep at the wheel. God is here and always has been.

God is *in the world*. He has not abandoned it and he has not abandoned us.

Amen.

