As we resume our journey through the Gospel of John, we come now to the fourth chapter and the famous story of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. In my sermon planning last spring, I allowed myself three messages on this text, but I have added at least one more due to the INCREDIBLE amount of depth and insight this story reveals about Jesus, evangelism, salvation, worship, our mission, and so many other insights. So, we will begin our treatment of this story by reading John 4:1-15, but please know…we will likely come back to this same text next week! Please stand and let us read the Word of the Lord together:

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), 3 he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. 4 And he had to pass through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

7 A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” 8 (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” 11 The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” 13 Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The title of my message this morning is *The Call to Samaria*. My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Kingdom Non-Compete Clause; 2) Where We MUST Go; and 3) Trusting God Beyond Fatigue and Normalcy.

I. The Kingdom Non-Compete Clause

John begins with some introductory material that helps set up the story that follows.

Based on the text we just read, here’s the picture: Jesus and his disciples are basically duplicating the ministry of John the Baptist in Aenon, a rural area in the Judean countryside. The fact that Jesus and his disciples are duplicating John’s ministry should come as no surprise since most, if not all of Jesus’ disciples at this point, were once disciples of John the Baptist. (We get the sense that Jesus may have been a participant in John’s ministry up to the time when Jesus was baptized). These men have been trained by John to preach repentance and the coming Kingdom of God—and they have been trained to baptize people who are truly repentant. No doubt their training and preaching has been greatly enhanced through their relationship with Jesus, but we
should not think that Jesus’ and his disciples set out in any way to “compete” with John the Baptist. They are simply doing the ministry they have been trained and called to do.

Following Jesus’ demonstrative cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, many people are now flocking to Jesus’ ministry instead of John’s, to the extent that John the Baptist is perceived by his own disciples as second-fiddle to Jesus (see last week’s message). Given that John the Baptist was highly respected as a priest’s son and a prophet of God, there was quite a stir brewing in Jerusalem amongst the Pharisees when they learned that Jesus, the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, was making and baptizing more disciples than John the Baptist.

When Jesus catches wind of this political bee’s nest in Jerusalem, He quietly decides to leave the area and once again return to his old stomping grounds in Galilee. Jesus has no interest in being perceived as John’s competition…that’s not why he is doing ministry, and that kind of press would likely hurt both his efforts and John’s efforts to see people repent of their sins and submit to baptism.

Jesus illustrates what I am calling the Kingdom Non-Compete Clause. To put it simply, if our Kingdom ministry is perceived as “in competition” with others who are doing ministry…both ministries are contaminated. There is a reason Jesus prayed so hard for the unity of His church in John 17. Those called to the ministry of the Gospel are never to be “in competition” with one another; and Jesus gracefully models that truth as He defers to John and quietly relocates His ministry to a new location. As we read how Jesus surrenders “position A” to John the Baptist, we can’t help but recall how Abraham surrendered the first choice of land to his nephew, Lot in Genesis 13. Choosing the humble path…taking the lesser piece…surrendering position A is always that which we see from God’s servant-leaders. We must always remember: the Kingdom of God does not operate on the same values as our secular culture, and here is yet another perfect example of that observation. The way of Christ is humility and generosity…not entitlement, power plays, or cut-throat competition. Let us now transition to my second subheading…

II. Where We MUST Go

In vss. 3-4 John writes, “…He left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria.”

This bit of travel narrative requires a bit of explanation. When Jews wanted to travel from Judea up to the region of Galilee, there were two routes to choose from (show map: http://www.springhillbaptist.org/uploads/6/4/5/7/64577395/luke-02-nativity-routes.jpg?919): 1) they could utilize the trade route which ran due north through the region of Samaria; or 2) they could utilize the Jordan River Valley route and travel up through Perea (modern day Jordan). The first route was shorter and more direct; the second added quite a few miles and perhaps an extra day of travel time. However, for many of the most devout Jews, particularly Rabbis, the longer route through Perea was almost a given. The first-century pious Jew was quite willing to travel a greater distance to avoid engagement with the much-maligned Samaritans.
Many of you know the history of the Samaritans, but many of you do not, so let me provide some biblical and historical context here for why there was such animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews.

If you have time later today, you can pull out your Bible and read I Kings 12—II Kings 17 where we learn about the history that led up to this enmity. Hang with me and I will quickly summarize the history: In 930 BC following the rule of King David’s grandson, the country of Israel was divided into two separate kingdoms. It’s a long and sad story, but from that point forward Israel was a divided kingdom. Skip ahead now many years following the establishment of the northern kingdom called Israel, and the northern kingdom is defeated and all but emptied by the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC. As was typical in that time, the Assyrians transplanted foreigners from other conquered countries (Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sevpheva) into the homes and businesses of the Jews. Not surprisingly, we learn in II Kings 17 that these foreigners did not fear God, so God sent many lions into their villages and many of the foreigners were killed. When the king of Assyria heard about the lions, he ordered that a Jewish rabbi be sent back to that region to teach the pagans how to fear and honor the god of that land. So, a priest was sent back who did, in fact, teach the pagans to fear God. Not surprisingly, however, the religion that evolved in that region was a combination of both Jewish and pagan traditions. As we read in II Kings 17:

But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the shrines of the high places that the Samaritans had made…the men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, the men of Cuth made Nergal…the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammlech and Anammelech, the gods of the Sepharvaim. So they feared the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away…they feared the LORD and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children’s children—as their fathers did, so they do to this day.

Now, the southern kingdom of Judah was also conquered later by the Babylonians in 587 BC. They too were taken into exile. However, the Babylonians did not resettle Judah with foreigners, so when the Jews returned from exile 70 years later, their practice of Judaism had remained “pure” and untainted by pagan practices and intermarriage. You can imagine their dismay when they encountered the Samaritan’s religion which had been very corrupted by pagan practices.

We learn in the book of Ezra that when the Jews came back from their exile in Babylon, the Samaritans desired to create a peaceful alliance with them, but the Jews refused. The Jews’ unwillingness to enter into an alliance with the half-breed Samaritans led to tremendous enmity, and we learn that the Samaritans actively resisted and even sabotaged the rebuilding efforts led by Nehemiah in Jerusalem. The Jewish historian, Josephus, records that several years later, probably in the middle of the 5th century BC, the Samaritans constructed their own temple to Jehovah on Mount Gerazim where they believed the original temple of Solomon was located. This “alternative temple” absolutely infuriated the Jews who held that there was only one true temple where the Lord dwelt, and that was in Jerusalem. The Jews later burned down the Gerazim temple in 113 BC. Well up to the days of Jesus, the Samaritans would often retaliate with efforts to desecrate the Jerusalem temple. Josephus recounts one such time in AD 9 when the Samaritans infiltrated into Jerusalem and scatter human bones all over the temple floor. So you get the point…there was a real, deep, unrelenting hatred between these two groups of people.
Given this history, we must pause and consider what John reveals in vs. 4, “And he HAD TO pass through Samaria.” Jesus didn’t have to pass through Samaria as a matter of geography. He could have taken the Perea route. So if Jesus “had to” pass through Samaria, we must assume it was only because the Father willed it, and Jesus was compelled to do all that the Father commanded of Him.

We must assume that Jesus is now being sent by the Father into the land of those whom the Jews detested even more than the Roman occupiers. Jesus is being sent into the land of baby-killers and idol worshippers. He is being sent to those who have a form of the true faith, even though they bow to idols made by their own hands…idols that have become culturally acceptable and even normal.

Church, does any of that sound familiar? It should. The context of ministry always requires that we go through Samaria. It is not enough to minister in Jerusalem and Judea (as Jesus has already done!) where we can assume a common starting place and we speak a common language. Jesus is now showing us that our mission leads us also into Samaria…into the land of those who offend us to the core…into the land of those who have corrupted the faith and yet claim to observe it! We are called to bring the hope of the Gospel to those who others have given up on…to those who are “avoided” by the good, religious people. If we are to follow Jesus, we too MUST go through Samaria, amen?

I would ask you to take a moment and identify what a call to Samaria might look like for you, your family…this church? Who are the people you love to hate? Who are the people that most offend you? If God calls you to “Samaria,” will you go? Hold on to that thought, and let’s look now to my third subheading:

III. Trusting God Beyond Fatigue and Normalcy

Now, let us consider what comes next in vs. 5-6, “So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there…” If we turn back all the way to Genesis 33, we find an obscure reference to Jacob purchasing a piece of property in the city of Shechem. Then, in Genesis 48, we read that Jacob entrusted a certain piece of property to his son Joseph. There is no reference to a well on that property anywhere in the OT, but it would make sense that a well would be dug on any piece of property owned by the great patriarch or one of his sons. If Jesus is now at Jacob’s well, located on the property referenced in Genesis 33 and 48, then we might assume that the city of Sychar was either the same as the ancient city of Shechem, or a community very near to Shechem where Jacob’s property was actually located. The word Sychar literally means “purchased,” so that may suggest that this part of Shechem was literally renamed to Sychar to honor the fact that Jacob “purchased” this plot of land so many years earlier.

Whatever the case, we get the sense that this place where Jesus now stops has meaning that points back to the Old Testament. At the minimum, we can clearly see that the Jews and the Samaritans have a similar faith heritage…they both claim Jacob as their spiritual father…so it is appropriate that here at Jacob’s well is where Jesus the Jew will encounter a Samaritan woman.
Now, the end of vs. 6 provides some interesting context as well that we must consider before we get to the action of the story. John writes: so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

First, notice that Jesus was weary from the journey. Such details are not to be taken lightly. Jesus is certainly fully God as we have seen on several occasions in John’s gospel, but here we see in living color that Jesus is also fully human. Walking from first light until noon through the hill country of the middle east made Him tired, just as it would for all of us.

As one commentator writes, “Jesus knew a weariness that the disciples could not comprehend.” I suspect that is true. In addition to the physical rigors of an ancient road trip, Jesus constantly carried the burden of a lost and condemned creation. His time was short, and it surely required tremendous energy all day, every day to prepare his misfit band of disciples to spread the Gospel to a hurting world. I can only imagine the dynamics of that group with all their varied backgrounds and sibling rivalries. I can almost hear Jesus sigh as he sits upon the edge of Jacob’s well, whispering quietly to himself, “I should have renamed Simon Peter… ‘motor-mouth!’” I’m sure Jesus loved his team with all of his heart, but I’m just as sure that they wore him out on most days!

In addition to his team, Jesus was constantly in high demand wherever He went. There were always people who needed healing; always those who were hurting; always more who wanted to touch him, hear him, and ask him questions. And then there was the hate mail. In every town there were those who were suspicious, those who accused Him of heresy, those who were immediately offended by this Nazarene who drew such a crowd. In addition to everything else, it’s incredibly exhausting to deal with people who are always negative, critical, and accusative. Any ministry leader can attest to that kind of exhaustion.

So...let us feel the weight that our LORD carried every day on our behalf, and let us consider and appreciate just how WEARY Jesus must have been as he plunked down on the side of the well. John reports that it was the sixth hour. The Jews numbered their hours based on the break of dawn, so the sixth hour would have been high noon.

Are you there? Can you feel the heat? Can you feel the aching legs and sore back? Is your mouth parched with thirst and your stomach grumbling with hunger? Church, you always want to enter into the story, and right now John has invited us to imagine just how tired Jesus is...just how desperately he needs to rest and do absolutely nothing. We know Jesus craved times of solitude, so we can almost imagine Him hoping that no one comes along...maybe he can grab a quick nap before the disciples return with lunch. At the minimum, perhaps He can enjoy some peace and quite in prayer with His Father.

But then, as he reclines with his eyes closed, he hears the soft steps of a woman who now approaches the well with her jar in tow. A quick glance reveals that she is all alone, and given the scowl and painful expression on her face, Jesus understands that she prefers to come here alone. She is no more excited to see a Jewish man reclining against the well as Jesus is excited to have someone interrupt his few moments of peace and quiet.
It is a moment of decision for Jesus. He has every reason in the world to feign that He is asleep and completely ignore this woman. For starters, she is a Samaritan, and no Samaritan would expect to be spoken to by a Jew…period. Secondly, this Samaritan is a woman, and no woman would expect a Jewish man to address her publicly in broad daylight. Such interactions were highly forbidden by the rabbinic codes of conduct. All Jesus has to do is honor normal boundaries and expectations, and the woman comes and goes without so much as a word.

Add to that the simple fact that Jesus is weary and desperately in need of rest, and we would all give Jesus a pass to simply remain quiet. I mean, if ever there was a time to put in the ear buds and take a nap, this was it, right?

But Jesus knows His mission, and He sees a hurting soul…so He presses through His fatigue. He presses through “normalcy” and He initiates a conversation with the Samaritan woman…and He does so out of love.

As Kent Hughes observes in his commentary, “Our Lord went for the heart of this woman, and we have here one of the most glorious cases of spiritual aggression in all of the Scriptures! Jesus reached out to others even when he was at the edge of physical exhaustion. He had a ministering heart.”

Church, let me tell you something about ministry in Samaria…it is always exhausting. Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, “The world is run by tired men.” Listen: if you are waiting for a time when you are not tired, when you are not worn to the bone…if you are waiting for a time when you feel rested, prepared, and competent to take on the ministry that God has placed on your heart…that time will never come. Jesus models what true ministry looks like MOST of the time. It looks like doing God’s will, stepping into a conversation, meeting a need, and working hard to win a heart exactly at that moment when all you want to do is retreat and rest. Ask any missionary, ask any stay-at-home mom! True love and service is most often expressed on the edge of exhaustion. Ministry is regularly accomplished when the Holy Spirit moves an obedient soul to press beyond exhaustion and normalcy to initiate a contact with a soul that God loves…a soul that has needs…a soul that may very well break your heart…but that’s what ministry in Samaria looks like on most days. Next week our Lord will show us exactly how to go about initiating a Samaritan conversation as we pick up the story here in John 4!

For now, as we prepare to step back into the mission field where we live, I want to challenge every believer to ask God where He is calling you to serve. Remember, this is not a competition. We are never called to compete with someone else’s ministry. But here’s what I can tell you with 100% certainty: God is calling each believer to minister in Samaria. God is always calling us to push through our exhaustion and the normal barriers of our culture, to go after the hearts of lost men and women…even if they are those who offend us. What does that look like for you? Who would God have you initiate a conversation with this week? Where has God mandated that you MUST go, even if you don’t yet feel like going there?

Friends, if you know you are being called to Samaria, then go! I can promise you that God will accomplish His purpose there, no matter how tired you might be, no matter how awkward the conversation. The first step is to leave position A, and to go where He leads you. So go…
Let’s pray