

“High Noon”
Acts 13:1-3; 17:22-32
John 4:3-9; 21-28a
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The storyteller Michael Lindvall once said that there are only TWO stories that have ever been told. / According to his theory - - every story is a version of one or the other. / Those two foundational stories, according to him, are: “A man or woman came to town” - - and “A man or a woman - - went on a journey...”.

I think there IS some truth to what he says.

There are hundreds of movies and books written about someone on a quest or a journey whether it is a physical journey - - or a journey of the spirit - - a journey of the mind - - or of some kind of discovery. / This is the plot for every classic quest ever written from Dante’s “Inferno” to “2001: A Space Odyssey”.

And there are hundreds of stories or movies about a stranger who comes to town and changes life there for the people who live there. / The visitor brings some new insight or perspective. / Think of the “Music Man” or any movie about alien visitors from outer space like “War of the Worlds”.

I think that if you adopt this theory - - then you tend to focus on the person who is either the VISITOR - - or the one taking the JOURNEY. / But what I’m interested in today are the people - - in the town that is visited. / What is it like to be them?

Specifically - - the places Paul visited.

And then - - also - - the places Jesus visited.

But let’s start with Paul.

The book of Acts is basically the story of all the travels of Peter and then Paul.

Paul wrote letters that make up half of the New Testament.

And they are letters to PLACES he visited.

He started the first churches there.

AND THEN - - he left town.

So what happened - - when Paul left town?

How did Paul's message about Jesus - - change things?

Did it?

And then - - how about Jesus?

Both Jesus and Paul - - crossed boundaries.

Paul crossed a LOT of geographical boundaries.

AND Jesus crossed a lot of social boundaries.

Boundaries between Jews and Gentiles and Romans and Samaritans...

The plot of the whole New Testament is DRIVEN by this movement.

This URGE - - to take the message of God's grace in Jesus - - OUT there.

To start us out thinking about this - - I want to consider the old Western - - "High Noon".

Anyone ever seen it?

"High Noon" with Gary Cooper - - and Lloyd Bridges - - and Grace Kelly.

Will and Amy are just married - - and about to retire into the sunset.

They plan to go on a journey together - - to another town.

Amy has tickets on the NOON train.

But then a villain comes to town.

And the decision that drives the movie is whether to LEAVE town.

Should they get out of town and avoid the confrontation?

Of course not!

They don't leave town just yet - - they stay and confront the villain.

At HIGH NOON - - Will confronts the villain.

While Amy jumps OFF the - - noon train - - to stay with him.

High noon becomes a moment of decision

High noon is a moment of clarity.

High Noon is a moment of confrontation.

A similar thing happens in the Gospel reading from John.

Jesus is on a journey, with his disciples - - through foreign territory. / They have gone north into the land of Samaria. / This is the land of the enemy and the heretic. / And just on the outskirts of a city in Samaria - - Jesus meets a woman at a well.

It is HIGH NOON. / John makes a point to tell us the time.

And commentators through the centuries have made a lot of this time. / "Why would a woman go to a well at noon in the heat of the day?", they ask. / And the answer given is that she has something to HIDE - - namely that she has had several husbands. / She is seen as a woman of a poor reputation. / And Jesus does question her about this. / But what happens AFTER that confrontation is MUCH MORE important. / SHE - - goes BACK into the city where she lives - - and talks to her people - - and they receive her.

Jesus goes on a journey.

Jesus IS that stranger who comes to town.

But this woman - - STAYS in the city after Jesus leaves.

And she changes lives!

Do you remember the story John tells just before this one?

John chapter 3 - - is about Nicodemus.

We read it last week - - if you were here last week you might remember...

WHEN did Nicodemus come to visit Jesus?

At NIGHT!

Nicodemus story begins in the DARK.

Nicodemus - - a secure Jewish believer and teacher - - is in the DARK.

But this woman - - an outsider - - a Samaritan - - is in the LIGHT!

Maybe she has NOTHING to hide after all?

Maybe commentators have disparaged her reputation because they were uncomfortable with her - - as a messenger of the gospel?

BUT - - could it be that this BOUNDARY CROSSING moment is a moment of ENLIGHTENMENT - - and that she is the one who leads others to the LIGHT?!

So often when we go somewhere foreign - - we go with mixed motives.

Christian mission has been about conquest.

We have crossed boundaries to build our own empires - - instead of to help others.

Christian mission has been about a confrontation - - between good and bad.

And we have not always done well in our relationship with native cultures.

And - - in the world TODAY - - in our nation and our culture - - we don't always do very well with people we see as outsiders. / There is fear - - and sometimes we isolate ourselves.

In the current situation with this Coronavirus concern, it is difficult to figure out how to take this text in, and what to do about it. Can we take it seriously, and also remain safe? I think part of the answer is in the kinds of boundaries we think about.

In the next few weeks we will be staying indoors and out of crowds. / It is important for all who are effected and at risk that we take these actions and not gather in large groups.

We do not want to spread this and hurt others.

SO we need to figure our new ways to stay connected.

Some of the ways are through the phone and the internet.

Give someone a call and let them know you care.

Sermons will be posted on the website for the next few weeks and recorded on Wednesdays. / So even though we will not be together at the church building, we will be connected in prayer and in caring for one another.

This may be how we continue to cross boundaries of isolation while not actually getting together in person.

So this text from John - - takes us to a different place today...

Here - - this woman at the well - - leads her people - - to the light of Christ.

So that makes me wonder about how OTHER people might respond.

When Jesus leaves town - - she shares her good news.

What about the people in all those towns - - that Paul visited?

Paul had a tough time of it at first - - with the early followers of Jesus. / Paul had been one of the MAIN persecutors of Jesus followers. So they - - were cautious.

When Paul encountered Jesus followers - - it was like HIGH NOON - - the old Western.

It was like High Noon - - and - - Paul was either the sheriff - - or the villain - - depending on your perspective. / Paul had thrown Jesus followers in prison - - and when Stephen was stoned to death - - there was Paul - - helping it along!

So now after Paul converts - - and becomes a follower - - some people are still a bit skeptical - - understandably. / Paul was an enemy - - worse than a Samaritan.

In fact so much so that Barnabas has to introduce him to the people in Antioch when he first arrives so they won't be afraid and reject him.

BUT - - Paul and his conversion to the way of Jesus has - - now also - - put him in conflict with the Synagogue and the traditional Jewish leaders - - who had been HIS OWN kind!

So Paul struggles with BOTH early followers of Jesus and with Synagogue Jews.

However - - when Paul REALLY gets out there - - and goes even further afield to the Aeropagus on Mars Hill in Athens - - he has a better time of it. / Paul is so far from home - - that people have no idea who he is - - just that he has some NEW TEACHING. / And Paul is complementary of their Greek gods - - in a way he never was complementary - - in a Synagogue.

So the point is - - it took a while - - for Paul to gain acceptance.

BUT - - Paul ALSO started - - MOST of the FIRST churches!

That's who the letters of Paul in the Bible are written to!

All these towns - - around the Mediterranean.

Paul went on a journey.

He visited these towns - - and started churches.

And then he LEFT TOWN.

And THAT - - is the point I want US to think about - - today.

WHAT happened when Paul left town?

I am interested in that point - - because it's where WE enter the story.

At that point - - we have to decide - - whether WE want to go on a journey of our own.

And maybe that means some kind of a SPIRITUAL journey - - if not a physical one.

The people in Corinth - - or Ephesus - - or Athens - - had to decide.

What would they do now?

Would they - - stick with Greek gods?

Would they support the traditional Jewish Synagogue?

Or would they believe this new Jewish sect that followed Jesus?

When Jesus left that woman at the well - - she had to decide too.

Would she risk telling other Samaritans about this Hebrew - - Jewish Rabbi - - Jesus?

Because CLEARLY - - this was no ordinary rabbi.

And Jesus followers - - totally REINTERPRETED - - the Jewish faith.

But what - - was the Holy Spirit doing - - in these cases?

And what is the Holy Spirit doing - - in OUR lives?

That's the question.

During these weeks when we can NOT gather in person and we need to MAINTAIN good physical boundaries - - for our own health and safety - - we can still stay connected to one another - - communicating by phone and helping each other as best we can.

These weeks will definitely be a spiritual and emotional journey that challenges us.

During these weeks of Lent - - last week and for the next two - - we are reading through the book of Acts - - with attention to the action of the Holy Spirit. / And we saw that John's gospel has different things to say about the Spirit - - from Acts. / But they both show us that the Holy Spirit - - sends us out - - after Jesus has left us.

After Jesus - - when we are left to our own choices - - with our faith and our prayers to guide us - - what will we choose to do?

One thing that happens when we start to listen for God - - and for the Spirit to guide us - - is that we are SENT. / Over and over - - the action of the Holy Spirit - - is to SEND people.

Usually we are sent - - across a boundary of some kind - - maybe a spiritual one.

But instead of a great conflict and a showdown - - can our HIGH NOON moment - - be - - a moment of ENLIGHTENMENT?

When we start to listen for the Holy Spirit - - there will be these “high noon” moments.

Moments of decision.

Moments of being EXPANDED - - and STRETCHED.

How will we respond?

And can we spread enlightenment instead of fear?

HIGH NOON - - CAN be - - something OTHER than a showdown.

It CAN be - - ENLIGHTENING - - instead.

Don't you think?

IF - - High Noon moments - - can become less deadly - - and more life giving...

In what way can this Samaritan woman - - at the well - - be our guide?

Even in times like these.