

The Land of My Ancestors

Isaiah 51:1–6 and John 4:7–26

As a Presbyterian, I'm not huge on religious sites. I'm just not too bothered if we know the exact location of the sermon on the mount, where the water turned to wine, or what corner the cross stood on, even where the tomb was. But after the privilege of spending so much time in the Holy Land and taking others to "holy sites" on repeated trips they've grown on me. Whether a miracle happened on that spot or not, the sacredness of those places is in the reverent spirit that millions of pilgrims have left. The love, tears, and devotion to God that they whisper over the ancient stones on their journeys from around the world, held there.

What does get to me though are the living landmarks, those still continuing to tell the ancient stories. The Sea of Galilee is shrinking as the water is reappropriated to grow crops not indigenous to the region, but it's the same sea Jesus sailed on. The heat, the dryness, the desert conditions are the same Jesus endured in his time of temptation. And nothing compares to harvesting olives from the still living, growing, fruit bearing trees that were thousands of years old already when Jesus walked the land. Al Bawdi, a tree in the Palestinian village of al-Walajah within sight of the apartheid wall, has been dated to around 5,000 years old. The trees in Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed before being arrested are over 2000 years old. They haven't moved. Silent witnesses to the borders redrawn around them, the language used to name the soil they are rooted in changed by one occupying empire after another. But their caretakers, their loving tenders, just as rooted to the land as the trees- weathering the storms of tyrants together.

I do not mean this just in a poetic sense. Olive trees are a domesticated species. Without pruning, occasional watering in droughts, and other care, they will go barren. Without a farmer's love, they stop growing olives. To see one of these trees heavy with fruit is to know it has been cared for consistently by loving hands like our own for thousands of years- THAT is a holy site to me. That is the spiritual heritage I want to claim. Not as a colonizer, but as a sibling of faith equally committed to caring for God's creation and sustaining it for generations to come.

It's the living history of the land that makes me feel closest to the divine, and to our ancestors of the faith who lived the scripture we look to for guidance. There's a lot about religious texts and stories we cannot know for sure. Did God really say that? Where the miracles real? The bones held in gilded cases in churches all across the land might very well belong to the disciples themselves. The wooden splinters preserved might be from the cross Jesus was crucified on or may just be any old scrap of wood. The cave that is revered as the place of Jesus' birth, might be the one that witnessed that miracle, or it may have escaped us, remaining unmarked; lost to time by confused neighbor's different narratives of whose house was whose.

The modern nation state of Israel has changed ancient names, borders, neighborhoods, and roadways to suit an ethno-state narrative, but one thing they cannot move is the very foundation of the earth, nor the Indigenous history that has blossomed there for millennia. Try as they might. Jericho, located in the middle of the West Bank, west of Jerusalem, is the oldest continuously inhabited place on earth, housing communities on the same land for over 10,000 years. Jericho, Nablus, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Gaza City (yes, that same one being wiped off the map now) have sustained sacred life for thousands of years. The land becomes holy then, not because it's made of more special dirt than a neighboring part, but because it provides life for God's creation. All these cities I names are located exactly where they are because there are natural water aquifers, containing an abundance of fresh water deep underground. In a place with little rain, a long coast of salt water, and desert conditions most of the year, these aquifers are the only thing standing between life and death.

Like planting an olive tree that will provide food, fuel, and tools; digging and maintaining a well that provides water in an environment like this is a holy calling- passed down as an ancestor in the family to be venerated. As we discussed with the children, this well that is central to our story today, is still providing water. Even though in English we call this Jacob's well church most often, the church of St. Photini is named for the

Samaritan woman herself. Christened Photini meaning “enlightened one,” the Eastern churches tell that after her encounter with Jesus, she travelled extensively, speaking as a disciple of Jesus and converting many people. She was quite successful, we can guess because she was brought before the Roman Emperor Nero to be persecuted for it; as you might recall- the Romans were not fans of Jesus, destabilizing the empire and all that. Photini refused to denounce her faith and was tortured and killed as a martyr. One of the relics on display in the church today is said to be part of her skull, not far from a finger bone of John the Baptist.

In western churches, in English, the story of the Samaritan woman is most often told centering on her multiple husbands and how amazing Jesus is for talking to some disgusting woman in public, especially a Samaritan one. ‘Eww, let’s judge her for surviving under a patriarchy’ the commentaries and preachers say. Like many women I know today, her husbands are the least interesting thing about her. This is the *first* person Jesus reveals his messianic identity to for crying out loud! While unfortunately brief, she and Jesus share a deeply theological conversation.

“Sir,” the woman says, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” She’s asking him about the land of their ancestors, the already diverse history of the Jewish people over 2,000 years ago. The Jews and the Samaritans having similar roots, but differing in their theology- which mountain is THE sacred place? Which mountain should we kill and die for to worship on? Which RIGHT mountain is the closet to God? The MOST sacred? People of every faith have always debated who “counts” who is really “from” here, who is really “us”. Like so many others in scripture, the Samaritan woman and Jesus remind us that identity is beautifully complicated and cannot have artificial lines drawn through it.

“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.” Here’s casual, approachable, need a drink of water just like everyone else Jesus, teaching us yet again, that God is not bound by time, space, a temple, or a family tree.

To grasp the gravity of this moment for the Samaritan woman, those she’s about to run and tell, and for us today, we need to be aware of Jacob’s story too- a common ancestor of both the Jews and Samaritans. Jacob, is ONE of the grandsons of Abraham. You remember- Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had father Abraham... Abraham’s son that fathered Jacob was Issac. With the help of his mother Rebekkah, he tricked his twin brother Esau out of his inheritance when their father died. It’s when he’s sure his brother is going to come kill him that Jacob wrestles with the angel on the bank of the river and is renamed, “Israel” meaning “to wrestle with” to struggle,” after not giving up. Giving the people of Israel their name, not bound by borders but shared heritage and faith.

Jacob later buys, BUYS, land near Sechem we hear in Genesis 33, which doesn’t mention the well the Samaritan woman attributes to him, but it stands to reason he would’ve built one if there was water there; quenching the thirst of his family and herds of animals in their turn. Jacob also meets his wife Rachel when visiting a well, continuing the family tradition of his own parents.

Rebekkah, Jacob’s mother was found for Issac when Abraham sent a servant all the way up to the land near the Euphrates river to find a bride (outside the borders of the modern state of Israel), rather than have him marry a local Canaanite woman. Rebekkah distinguishes herself from the crowd when she offers to use her jug to help the men and camels get water. Because the key here is knowing you had to bring your own jug to the well for water. Women were typically the ones who carried it back to the homes, so they were the ones most likely to be able to give anyone else water.

So when the Samaritan woman asks Jesus how he’s going to give her everlasting water, this isn’t solely some mystical esoteric conversation. She’s looking at him like he’s lost his mind; the boy doesn’t even have a

ladle, let alone a jug, and HE's the one promising to give HER water. She's provided water for man after man in her life that have seemingly been useless at offering her any kind of stability or meeting of basic needs, which Jesus is well aware of. And here he is promising not just regular water, but sacred water- direct from the Messiah.

Now these stories of the ancestors at wells would be well known to Jesus and to the Samaritan woman before their encounter. They were places where accidental meetings could happen in otherwise strictly segregated communities, because no matter your identity, you need water to survive. The Samaritan woman and Jesus meeting, not only breaks the gender boundaries but the religious ones. It also shows Jesus opening inheritance, by not marrying this woman- unlike his ancestors who used wells like nightclubs to pick up the ladies. He instead meets a woman who has had "many" husbands, and she is trusted with this gospel meeting. What the woman at the well inherits is not biological, it's gospel; and that's what she offers the world. Her children may be of unclear lineage, because clearly these men aren't suitable fathers, but the inheritance she offered was one of faith- not borders or genetics, but abundant life, with the boldness to talk theology with the Jesus himself and go toe to toe with the Roman emperor.

The covenant with Abraham, it's description as his descendants being as numerous as the stars, is meant to be expansive. And God's promise was not to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah's one particular grandson, it was to Abraham- which includes Hagar's child, Ishmael and all of his descendants. It includes all the people they adopted, it includes all the people that they love... and their enemies. It includes us... and our enemies. God made a covenant with Abraham, but I do not for one second believe that actually makes anyone more chosen or special to God than any other. God put a calling in Abraham's life that we know about because this one got written down. But it is the foundation of racism and prejudice of every kind, and an insult to God's expansiveness of identity and creation to insist one people is more chosen than another. As if a truly loving God would ever have a favorite child, how petty. This is the root of systems of supremacy, even when we mean well, and it cannot remain in our theology unexamined. It gives rise to both racism, resentment, and antisemitism, and is antithetical to God's love of all creation.

The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are living writings of people just like us trying to make sense of their place in the world. They are not permanent definitions and land deeds written in stone; they're complex stories we're supposed to keep writing together. The land of these ancestors is sacred not because Abraham hosted angels there, or Jacob wrestled with one, but because- like every other patch of land-God created it to provide for the people, for generation after generation; sustaining life when empire after empire tries to crush it. It is not sacred because it is any more special to God than the land we're standing on now, that cared for generation after generation of Indigenous people here before our own genocidal settler colonial history removed them. To God's people wherever they are, land is not a thing to be occupied, possessed, or stolen but adopted as a family member.

Samaritans still live today on this same mountain, which as I mentioned is in the West Bank- supposedly Palestinian territory. They too are descendants of Jacob, "Israel" for whom the state is named, but do not count as Jewish under Israeli law. They are subjected to the same checkpoints, restrictions, and apartheid conditions as their Palestinian siblings- Christians and Muslims alike. They do not live in illegal Israeli settlements, but Palestinian villages- as they have always done.

The aquifer that has sustained life in Gaza for thousands of years, has been ruined by Israel's unnatural siege of the area. The people held captive there for over 15 years before Oct. 7th were forced to overly deplete the aquifer to survive, letting salt water from the sea flow in from the coast and sewage, debris, and munition runoff seep in from above- causing birth defects, cancer, and God only knows what other long term health problems. The World Health Organization predicted that Gaza would be unlivable by 2020, when already 97% of their water was unsafe to drink. That was years before the genocide we're witnessing now- when Israel was already counting the calories let into the area. Saying that if they could not kill them outright, they would put

them on a diet. Now Israeli politicians who do not believe in God, quote “scripture” as their justification to annihilate the Palestinian people, like the Israelites did the Amalekites.

But scripture is not meant to predict the future, try as some might to alleviate their own anxiety. Scripture tells us how our ancestors of the faith responded to the challenges of their time, and if we believe that Jesus’ spirit is with us though the collective body of the church- we are still writing scripture now with our lives. The stories they chose to record in the Bible give us pause, reasonable cause for judgement, and horror at some of the things they believed God was calling them to do. But how much better are we doing? I hear often people lament the existence of the Old Testament because that God is just too violent. But have you looked outside? Was it ever GOD that’s been violent? Perhaps it was the ones writing the story down and looking for an excuse to ignore God’s laws of love and justice, just as we see world leaders who claim “Christian” and “Jewish” beliefs but repeat this pattern today. Unlike the scarce written records of the past, our descendants will have a full digital record of our thoughts, actions, and cowardice. Or we can leave them a scripture reading filled with hope. Filled with average people, like Photini the Samaritan women who face down the tyrants of their day with faith and love.

Christians have been convinced by the earthly powers that be that “peace” is just quiet. But peace cannot exist without wholeness, restoration, and justice. And justice cannot exist without love, the everlasting, thirst quenching kind. That is not a quiet love. It might be done silently, but it’s loud- in our homes, schools, streets, courthouses, hospitals. I know that the world seems more unstable, more uncertain that it ever has right now, but if there’s one thing I know without a doubt, is that the God of our brave ancestors needs us to be so loud with our love right now. Listen to where God is calling is calling you to water the world; to care for your neighbors, to look deeply and draw deeply from your own well of energy, time, and talents to sustain this beautiful creation that God has us. Amen.