

Lent III

“He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

What a strange, authentic, confession of faith, what peculiar testimony, the Samaritan woman offered.

I won't drag you into the convolutions of the Greek grammar in which this rendered, or the Aramaic in which the original conversation would have taken place.

But think about how a double negative turns into a positive and you can hear it all well enough in English:

He cannot be the Messiah, can he?

Put a full stop, a big period after Messiah, and it is a simple denial of the identity, of the divine origin of Jesus.

He cannot be!

Many people were saying that.

She says something much more complicated, something with faith in it, if not something faithful.

She *knows* but she will not *acknowledge*.

Perhaps you can hear the fear of the unknown, the resistance to a moment of revelation, the avoidance of change and transformation in her statement.

We can reject people, ideas, interpretation, and move right along.

Denial is different; it is a willful turning away from reality, from a truth that is, a truth that is not changed by our turn away from it.

Only we are changed by our acts of denial, not the truth we deny.

Our reality shifts through denial but reality itself does not.

This is not a simple rejection but a denial of an unchangeable reality, the sort of thing we all know plenty well about.

“She can't be gone; this can't have happened; surely this is a bad dream from which I will be awakened; maybe the test results will change.”

You are not human if you never play those games in your mind, if you never wish away or try to ignore the hardest and saddest things you have to face.

But the Samaritan woman sensed her denial, sensed reality beating against her defenses and added: can he?

He cannot be the Messiah, can he?

In a breath, she denied him and then denied her denial, in a question to the people of the village.

There is something here about how faith is found and how faith endures;

Something here about how Jesus is found and how he comes to live in our own being.

There is a word here for people like us, whose faith is tested by crisis, conflict, and the spirit of the age.

We don't have time to plumb the depths of this passage, to explore the parlay back and forth in which Jesus and the woman were engaged.

Much was in play; a tired man, unexpectedly speaking with a woman on an errand.

A Hebrew, unexpectedly asking hospitality from a Samaritan.

Theological disagreement about worship and God's identity; Jerusalem or Mount Gerazim.

And Jesus' persistent move toward revelation of himself and her frequent turn back toward mundane realities.

He talked about living water; she talked about his lack of a bucket.

He exposed the mundane difficulties of her past; she then became the theologian, calling him a prophet.

It reads like the transcript of some dates I had, with conversational effort never resulting in anything particularly satisfactory.

There are moments here, to be sure, but a holy and perfect clarity is not achieved.

And so it is fitting that her testimony has the convoluted character of a double-negative. She testified out of her confusion, her testimony intertwined with a healthy measure of doubt.

She was a most uncertain disciple; reminding me of Nicodemus who we met last week, of others in the Scriptures who drew near to Jesus but left too soon.

Reminding me, of course, of myself and many of us, people whose faith inevitably waxes and wanes

whose need for repentance is real

whose testimony sometimes comes out in a weird syntax or with a feeble enthusiasm.

Yet her convoluted testimony was enough; God used it among the people of the village.

He cannot be the Messiah, can he?

This was enough to pique their interest.

They sought him out and he remained with them for two days, and the Spirit worked.

They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Her barely credible testimony was enough to lead them to ask and hear for themselves.

Indeed, it might have been the only kind of testimony that would have worked among a people bored by their religious leaders and pummeled by their theological opponents.

So, this isn't all real, is it?

All this stuff, this is all too good to be true, right?