

SERMON TITLE: “The Two Mountains”

TEXT: John 4:19-25

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: Gil Dueck

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So my name is Gil and I’m here to inadvertently tell you things you’ve already heard before. This morning I find myself in a rather odd position. I don’t really know any of you and you all probably feel like you know me fairly well. Over the course of our time here in Nanaimo I’ve grown accustomed to the awkward looks, at times the bewildered stares, of people who perhaps didn’t know that their pastor had a body double. But overall the welcome has been very warm – one person was even kind enough to tell me that I wasn’t as creepy as they thought I’d be. I wasn’t sure if that was a comment on her opinion of Ryan or just the weirdness factor of meeting his twin.

I have come to peace with the fact that every word that I say this morning may very well make you elbow the person beside you and say, “that’s exactly the kind of thing Ryan would say”. There’s a very good chance that I’ll say something that Ryan has already said – probably in the exact words that he said it. If this happens you have two options: you can smile politely and pretend it never happened. Or you can lean forward in your chair as if you’ve heard something truly inspirational and can’t wait to hear more. Either way I will be oblivious and you can have something to talk about over lunch later today.

The writer of Ecclesiastes has said, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc 1:9). I have a suspicion that the author had more of a historical perspective and mind. Ryan and I have just had a more immediate and ongoing reminder of how little we say or do is actually new.

I feel like I should give you a bit of personal background. I always feel a bit awkward doing this. It’s not as if my life is so spectacular or interesting that it’s worth five precious minutes of your life. But on the other hand, I think you have some right to know something about a person who has the nerve to stand at the front of your church and preach at you when you didn’t have any say in the matter. I will skip the biographical details since many of you will already know those – if you have any questions, just as Ryan.

I'm here with my family this morning. My wife Shelley and I just celebrated our tenth wedding anniversary about two weeks ago. Shelley has spent the past six or so years taking care of our growing brood of daughters. In addition to this demanding task she has just accepted a position as executive director of a group home for people with mental disabilities and is looking forward to starting this new challenge upon our return to Saskatchewan. I'd tell you more about how Shelley and I came together but that story typically takes much longer and I know you're eager for me to get to the sermon.

We have three lovely girls. Julie is our oldest and she just celebrated her sixth birthday this week. Lana shares a birthday with her dad and her beloved uncle Ryan and she just turned four. Our youngest is Kendal and she is about 18 months old. All three of them have loved reconnecting with their island cousins and we've had a great time seeing some of the local attractions in and around Nanaimo.

I've spent the past six years at Bethany College in Hepburn, SK (about half an hour north of Saskatoon in case you're one of the few people in Canada who doesn't know where Hepburn is). We do get our fair share of students from BC, mainly strong independent types who are trying to get as far away from their parents as possible and want to experience something *totally* out of the ordinary.

We've actually had a few students come from the island although sadly none from Nanaimo (if you want to change that statistic, talk to me after the service). In my time at Bethany we've had students from Victoria and Courtenay and their experience has been very similar. When they are confronted with the sublime beauty of Saskatchewan winters they are almost always amazed that we don't get more students from their neck of the woods. I know, it's a mystery to me too.

So I'm an instructor at Bethany and my main teaching area is theology. That's a word that causes all kinds of reactions in people – from fear to confusion to delight – but my job is actually a very enjoyable one. I used to say that theology was mainly about what Christians believe but I've come to see that as an inadequate definition. It's a definition that too easily leaves theology in the mental realm and never really addresses the question of how we're going to live.

So I've started using the language of 'convictions'. It's a better world, I think, because reminds us that we're talking about more than just ideas, we're talking about the beliefs that define us, the beliefs that determine how we view every other aspect of our lives and the beliefs that ultimately determine how we live.

Bethany tries to take this seriously. We tend to get a lot of students who have grown up in the church, who have likely been involved in Sunday school, youth groups, missions trips, summer camps and who come to college with a sincere, but sometimes inherited faith. We see our role as one of helping students come to a place where they embrace that faith as their own.

One of the most enjoyable parts of my job is simply the freedom that my position gives me to have conversations with people about what I think are pretty important questions. Our students are at a very formative stage. They're asking big questions about the purpose of their lives, about identity issues, and about what God is doing in the world. It is a privilege to be granted access into that 'space,' the space where we talk about the things that matter most.

It seems to me, as I read the gospels that Jesus often found himself in this kind of 'space' with people. He seems to be able to get beyond superficialities quite quickly with people and get straight to the heart of the matter. So this morning I want to focus on one particular conversation that Jesus had – a conversation about mountains.

The Background

The conversation is recorded in John 4:19-26 and the person that Jesus is talking to is a Samaritan woman. This is a strange conversation partner, this Samaritan woman. That she was a woman in itself would have been a shocking thing for John's readers – Jewish men didn't speak to women in public; it was generally frowned upon even for a husband to speak to his own wife outside of the home.

And a *Samaritan* woman? Samaria was a province north of Judea and its capital of Jerusalem. So the Samaritans were close neighbours of the Jews but were generally despised and looked down for a number of historical reasons.

The division of these two people groups went all the way back to the time after the death of Solomon when Israel's allegiances were split between Solomon's son and one of Solomon's former officials. So one nation became two: the two southern tribes became known as Judah and their capital was Jerusalem. The ten northern tribes became known (somewhat confusingly) as Israel and their capital was Samaria. These ten northern tribes were eventually conquered and assimilated by the Assyrians and the race that emerged from the intermarrying of the Israelites and the Assyrians became known as the Samaritans.

The Samaritans continued to worship the same God as their southern neighbours but the rivalry between the two led to the development of two streams of tradition. The Samaritans were geographically isolated and did not make their annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem for festivals or other holy days. They accepted on the first five books of the Old Testament.

Among many other historical grievances, most Jews resented the Samaritans because they had hindered the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple after the Jews had returned from their time in exile under Babylon and later Persia. Later they had aided the Syrians in several wars against the Jews.

So the general view of Samaritans is that they were traitors who couldn't be trusted as well as illegitimate heirs of God's promises. This hatred was also a religious rivalry since both groups argued that **they** were the rightful heirs of the promise of God.

So by Jesus' time most devout Jewish travelers would avoid going through Samaria altogether and would choose instead to take a longer detour through Perea on the eastern side of the Jordan river.

The Context

So we have Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman. We have Jesus talking to someone he has no business talking to. Jesus is breaking through all kinds of barriers – social, historical, religious, gender – and all of this through a conversation.

The location of this meeting is also significant. Jesus meets her at a well but this is not just any well. The well is known as 'Jacob's well' because it is situated on a plot of land that Jacob had given to his chosen son Joseph all the way back in Gen 48:21,22 (cf. Josh 24:32). This is also likely where Joseph was eventually buried and by Jesus' time this had become a popular resting place for pilgrims travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The disciples have gone into town to buy food and this woman has come to the well alone. Given what we learn of this woman marital history, we know that she's coming to the well alone because she's a bit of a social outcast, looked down upon by the other women from her village.

So here we have the unlikely pair. Jesus, the devout Jewish rabbi on his way to Jerusalem, and a lonely, promiscuous, Samaritan woman. And Jesus **addresses** her, asking her for a drink. This would have broken a lot of rules – a single Jewish man addressing a woman in public would have been perceived as flirtatious or worse.

Wells were very public locations and they were known to be places where interested men could find 'interesting' women. The woman reacts in shock to Jesus' request. Even if Jesus doesn't know this is inappropriate, she certainly does.

The Conversation

From here we listen in on a fairly meandering conversation. Jesus invites her to have a drink of living water, suggesting that if she knew who she was talking to, this would be the normal request. The woman is understandably confused. Who is this man? Is he greater even than Jacob himself – the one for whom the well is named. And what on earth is living water anyways?

Abruptly Jesus changes directions and asks her to bring her husband – a loaded question of course, since Jesus knows very well that this woman has had a series of husbands and was now with a man who she wasn't even married to. The conversation finally ends up with a discussion concerning, of all things, mountains.

The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet.

"Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

"You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

*"But an hour is coming, and now is, when the **true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.***

"God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us."

Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."

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 sexual history and toward an age old religious controversy.

One minute we're talking about how many husbands this woman's 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 embarrassing conversation about individual sins, the next minute we're engaged in a centuries-old debate on religious geography.

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.

I always tell my students that Canadians, especially Canadians on the prairies, with the wide open spaces and seemingly limitless amount of land, have a very difficult time appreciating how much certain '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 he lived on the temple mountain in Jerusalem. If you were a Samaritan, he 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' answer, as always, was revealing...

The time is coming and has now come...

This is a phrase that is loaded for Jews and Samaritans. Both of these groups lived in expectation of a time when God would intervene and take care of the problems that they were facing. Both Jews and Samaritans lived under the thumb of the Romans. Both lived with a heightened sense of injustice at the people of God living in their

own land under the rule of a pagan power. Both expected that a time would come when God would fix this problem and that their particular group would be reinstated.

So when Jesus says ‘the time is coming and has now come’ he is calling all of these expectations to mind. Yet something different is going on here – 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.

In the Spirit and in truth...

So what does Jesus mean by saying that true worship will happen, not by looking to these two mountains, but will be in Spirit and in truth. So what on earth does that mean – spirit and truth?

Because the truth of the matter is that we don’t inhabit a world so different from the Samaritan woman. There are, of course many things that are different. But we are also very concerned about the question, ‘Where is God really available?’ And, like the Jews and the Samaritans, we have mountains on which we think we’ve found the answer.

We tend to live with two conceptions of God in our mind – given the context of the story we’ve just read, we could call these two ideas two **mountains**. They are not geographical locations like Gerizim and Jerusalem but they exercise just as powerful a hold on our imagination as these two mountains did for the Samaritan woman.

The first idea is of God as the **absentee landlord** – God is basically the boss but he’s not really all that involved. Here, God is **beyond** us. The world operates according to impersonal laws and most of the stuff that happens to us and to our world doesn’t have much to do with God. He may have created the world, but he’s not all that involved in the ongoing maintenance of it. This is a very remote God, one who is ‘out

there' somewhere, high atop some mountain that is largely inaccessible to us. The key direction here if we're thinking about where God is, is UP.

We might respect this God, we might admire the creative power of this God, we might even *fear* this God. What we wouldn't have is much of an ongoing sense of this God's presence or activity in our lives. This kind of a God is perhaps a comfort, a good explanation for ultimate questions like "where did we come from?" and "is there life after death?"

This is the God that roughly 80% of Canadians still say that they believe in. This is a God that explains everything but demands almost nothing. This kind of a God, if he ever showed up at all, would only be observable if he did something miraculous. But the world in which we spend our days is basically devoid of the presence of God. He might show up once in a blue moon and raise someone from the dead but for the most part, we're on our own here.

The second idea is of God as the **genie in the bottle** – here, God is **within** us. When we want to consider what God does and where God operates we think immediately of the inner, subjective experience. God communicates to us through a 'still, small voice,' perhaps through inner impressions or specially orchestrated circumstances that are all designed to teach us particular lessons or aid in the development of our character. What is critical is that the realm in which God operates is an inner realm – it's the realm of individual hearts and individual experiences. Here the key direction to think of is IN. And this is the mountain that I think many North American evangelicals look toward as they offer their worship.

This is how we may be tempted to hear Jesus' words about worshipping in 'spirit and truth'. But this is not simply a call to an 'inward' faith. Jesus isn't telling the Samaritan woman to stop looking at a mountain and to look inside her heart instead.

We hear the word 'spirit' and we think 'inner' or 'spiritual'. We think of a realm of experience that is *other* than the normal, everyday realm in which we go to work, have friends over for BBQs, drive our kids to soccer, worry about the economy and pay our mortgages. We think that the word spiritual means the things that we do with our eyes closed and our hands folded (or maybe raised).

But the word 'spirit' is a word with a very simple meaning. It means 'breath' or 'wind'. It's the same word used in the first chapter of Genesis when God breathes the 'spirit' of life into Adam and he comes a living being. In a sense, spirit, refers to the 'wind' of God that animates us, that enlivens our world, the breath that makes life possible.

Later on, in Acts 17:28 Paul tells a group of sceptics in Athens that God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. I sometimes tell students that if they've moved today, they've witnessed an act of God. If they've breathed (sometimes a doubtful assertion on a Monday morning), they've witnessed an act of God.

Dallas Willard has compared the way that God relates to the world to the way that we relate to our bodies. If I wanted to 'learn' about one of you this morning, the last thing I should do is get you onto an operating table, open you up and see what's inside. All of us know that this is not the way that we 'know' someone. Our 'selves' exist somewhere other than inside our bodies, they are made up of our memories, our facial expressions, our relationships, our wills, our behaviour, our living and moving and being.

In the same way, God inhabits our world. We don't find God by taking our world apart, analyzing every rock and twig, looking under every bush hoping at last to maybe find some evidence of God. God doesn't occupy the world, he fills it, he overflows it. God is as present with us as the breath in our lungs.

To worship God in Spirit is to recognize this and thank him for it. It means becoming *attentive* to the many ways in which God's Spirit gives life, *breathes* life into our lives.

This past year Julie and Lana were registered in soccer. Now I'm a big soccer fan but I'm not a big 'kinder-soccer' fan. There is nothing aesthetically pleasing or exciting about watching a group of 4-6 year old kids swarming like a pack of bees around the soccer ball, at times kicking each other in the shins, at times stopping to examine a rock or a worm, at times running crying to mom or dad because another kid took the ball away. If I had a free afternoon I would not go and watch kinder-soccer.

But when it's MY little girls playing kinder-soccer I become *attentive* in a different way. And I do this for a very simple reason – my kids are spectacular. And, of course, I love my kids. And so I attend to this game in a different way because I love them. I look for things, however small, that I can compliment them for. You made contact with the ball – that's wonderful. You stayed inside the lines – that's exceptional! You didn't put it into your own net – you're amazing!! When I watch my girls play soccer, I notice things that I wouldn't otherwise notice. I'm attentive in a different way. I'm looking for different things. And when I'm looking *in this way* I find them.

I think it's the same when it comes to looking for God. The fact that we sometimes find it difficult to 'see' God might mean that we're looking in the wrong places or in the wrong ways. We have to be looking in a certain way. We have to be attentive to

life in a different way. And when we are, we will find that the life of God and the love of God are all around us.

When we do this we will find that God is not someone who periodically invades our lives from another place. No, God is truly the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

So do we believe what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman? Do we believe that God is available beyond the two mountains? Do we believe that, in Jesus, God has literally invaded every corner of our world, of our experience, of our excitement and our mundane daily tasks and offered us the opportunity to recognize him in it and to praise him for how he is making all things new?