

Miscarriage *John 4:5-42*

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As my father gently reminds me, I am now in the middle of my childbearing years. And, while I might feign protest, I know that he is right. The truth of his words is evidenced in the lives of those close to me; increasingly, my peers are consciously choosing to pursue pregnancy and parenthood. For a few, conception and childbirth come easily. Many others, however, find pregnancy illusive and impossible to corral—here one moment and gone the next. Their quiet stories and deep pain have both heightened my awareness of miscarried pregnancies and prompted me to begin thinking about this lived reality theologically.

Studies reveal that my friends who have suffered the unexpected and unwanted end to pregnancy are not alone; approximately fifteen percent of all clinically recognized pregnancies end in miscarriage. While these numbers suggest that miscarriage touches many in our faith communities, it has never been mentioned in the congregations with which I have worshipped and worked. Hoping to address miscarriage in the context of the church, last year I listened for occasions within the lectionary that might speak a gospel word to the bodily loss that many congregants face, too often in silent isolation.

The opportunity arose when I heard the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4. Often heard and preached during the season of Lent as a story of sin, condemnation, repentance, and penitential belief, I was struck by the elements of the story that are absent if indeed these are the pillars of the narrative's theological framework. For example, Jesus never asks the woman to change her current living situation, and the woman never verbally repents for her actions. Instead, at the end of their dialogue filled with irony, double-meanings, misunderstanding, and understanding, the woman runs away in awe and excitement to tell her fellow villagers about the man Jesus, testifying that "he told me everything I ever did" (John 4:39 NIV).

Different from what we may have been taught, therefore, these words suggest that the narrative's power resides in Jesus' intimate knowledge of the Samaritan woman's story that he revealed that day by the well. For the Samaritan woman, Jesus' entrance into the crevice of her life that remained silenced under the weight of social and religious unacceptability was life-changing good news. This reading of John 4 makes the bold claim that, in some cases, making public that which is either allowed or forced to remain private has the power to prompt or encourage belief. Perhaps for the sake of the gospel, we too might carefully begin to uncover and name those places into which we as the church have been hesitant to enter. To this end, this sermon seeks to name miscarriage in the liturgical lives that we share.

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Many people I know like the liturgical season of Lent. Contrary to what the actions of religious people might suggest, I think our appreciation for this portion of the church year extends beyond what it can do for our waistlines or our piety. I think that

people appreciate Lent because they see, hear, and feel the church operating differently during this season. In the shadow of the cross, our sanctuaries are dimly lit and our paraments plain. We are given permission to use gritty language during worship in order to name life's sober realities. And, as the church, we even choose to spread dirt across the forehead of persons who approach the altar on Ash Wednesday and wash the earth-stained feet of our neighbors on Maundy Thursday. Lent is one season in the church year in which we feel little need to give easy answers to life's greatest, and often-painful, mysteries. Instead, during Lent, we choose simply to uncover and name the private crevices of our lives that often remain shrouded in secrecy.

Poets and musicians have a name for this process of uncovering and naming; they call it elegy. Elegy, a word we do not often throw around in the church, describes a poem or a song of mourning that reflects on the death of someone or on sorrow more generally. Elegy can speak to something common to the human experience—like the passing of time—or something strange or mysterious, such as the unexpected end to a relationship. Elegy gives words to the sober realities in our lives, which may be why so many of us are drawn to elegiac works like poetry or country music, depending on the level of refinement of our literary and musical tastes. It is because musicians and poets dare to enter life's private crevices that beg to be named that we listen and, ultimately, choose to sing along with them.

Though Lent allows the church to go into shadowy places in the lives of God's people, there are still many into which we hesitate to enter. If history is any judge, miscarriage—the premature and often undesired end to pregnancy—is one such place. Perhaps miscarriage feels too personal, like something that ought to be left to intimate partners, family, and close friends. Maybe because it often occurs during the first trimester of pregnancy, we are unaware of its painful presence in the lives of our congregants. Or, perhaps, the absence of any explicit references to it in the lectionary keeps us from preaching and speaking about it; the texts that drive our conversations don't provide us with an easy entrance into the discussion. Whatever our reasons, I suggest that we carefully uncover it and name it today with the help of the Samaritan woman's story on this the third Sunday in Lent.

The scripture reading for today always finds its lectionary home in the season of Lent. The season's emphasis on repentance, coupled with the passage's longstanding interpretive history, makes it easy for preachers to treat the Samaritan woman as the typecast sinner—the one whose incorrigible sins were revealed by a righteous Jesus that day by the well. But, today, I want to propose a different interpretation of this passage that locates it within the Lenten tradition of uncovering and naming that we have already identified.

In John chapter 4, Jesus and his disciples are passing through Samaria on their way to Galilee. Jesus, tired out, stops by the well while his disciples go into town to fetch some food. A Samaritan woman approaches him, and thus begins their ironic dialogue about living water—one of the longest in the New Testament. Throughout their conversation, the gospel writer makes it clear to the reader that the woman doesn't fully understand what Jesus is saying to her. For instance, when Jesus tells the woman that if she knew who he was, she would ask him for a drink, and he would give her living water, she naively replies: "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" (John 4:10-11). The conversation continues this way—with the reader feeling either superior to or frustrated by

the woman who never quite gets the message. Lest we think this is a characteristic attributable only to the Samaritan woman, the disciples display the same confusion just verses later.

But, then, in the passage's first moment of clarity, we hear Jesus call the woman out—or so translators have led us to believe and interpreters have told us. In verse 16, Jesus says, "Go, call your husband and come back." The woman answers him, saying, "I have no husband." To this Jesus responds, "You are right when you say that you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have said is quite true" (John 4:18). For generations, interpreters have claimed that Jesus' words are evidence of the woman's immorality.

But, if we are honest readers, we need to remember that in the ancient world, women had little control over their own lives. New Testament scholar Gail O'Day writes that "there are many possible reasons for [the Samaritan woman's] marital history other than her moral laxity. Perhaps the woman, like Tamar in Genesis 38, is trapped in the custom of levirate marriage, and the last male in the family line has refused to marry her."¹ Whatever the reasons that stand behind her past and present relationships, we can assume that the options available to the Samaritan woman to keep her family housed, clothed, and fed would have been limited to say the least.

If we consider the woman's powerlessness in her situation, then, the tone of Jesus' words changes. Rather than hearing Jesus pronounce an indictment, as most interpreters would have us do, we hear Jesus simply uncovering and naming the sober realities of the Samaritan woman's life. She has had five husbands; and, now, most likely for the sake of survival, she is forced to live outside of social and religious boundaries with a man who is not her husband. To the woman's reality, Jesus does not speak words of condemnation or offer easy answers. He simply chooses to validate her words and her experience, saying, "What you have said is quite true" (John 4:18).

This reading of the gospel text is supported by the fact that Jesus never asks the Samaritan woman to leave her living situation, and the woman never offers words of repentance for her actions. Instead, the text reminds us that it is because Jesus told the woman everything that she had ever done, that she came to believe (John 4:39). In the patriarchal world of the first century, it may have been just as appropriate for the Fourth Evangelist to say that Jesus told the woman everything that had ever happened to her, over which she had little or no control.

Contrary to what we may have been taught, therefore, the power of this narrative need not reside in Jesus' abrupt disclosure of the woman's sin and her penitential belief. Instead, if we assume that the woman lived under the cover of social and religious silence, then it is Jesus' gracious act of uncovering and naming her reality that brings about her first moment of clarity and belief. It is Jesus' recognition of the Samaritan woman's experiences that causes her first to declare Jesus to be a prophet and later to bear witness to him to the entire city (John 4:19; 39-42). For the Samaritan woman, Jesus' entrance into the private crevice of her life was good news.

In this season of Lent, we seek to bear witness to the gospel as we carefully uncover and name miscarriage in this liturgical space. Despite our fears that it is too personal, our unawareness of its painful presence in our community, or its absence in the texts that shape our conversations, today we recognize miscarriage as a painful reality that

has too long been shrouded by the church's silence. Many women and men who have grieved the unexpected end to a pregnancy have been forced to face their feelings of powerlessness, sorrow, betrayal, hopelessness, fear, fragility, emptiness, and anger in quiet isolation. They have waited for a word from the Christian community, which to our shame, has too rarely been spoken. In her elegy on miscarriage, theologian Serene Jones articulates her own silent waiting, saying:

Throughout my own miscarriages, I had wanted and waited for something religious to happen—for a divine presence to enter into the space of my grieving and give me comfort, for the touch of a savior who might open me to the boundless stretch of grace, for the voices of a community that could remind me of life's precious persistence in the midst of such loss.²

Today, in our dim Lenten sanctuary, we grieve that we are unable to control, in many ways, what happens to our lives and our bodies. We mourn the ways that our own bodies sometimes betray our hopes. And, we lament the ways that our communities have often failed to meet us in our deepest sadness. In our sorrow, we do not rush to easy answers to one of life's greatest and most painful mysteries. But, instead, we agree to speak this elegy of miscarriage together at the foot of the cross.

Once there, and after we have allowed time for the community to uncover, to weep, to name, to yell, and to be silent, we will turn and remind our neighbor that God promises to enter into our space of grieving and comfort us. We will tell each other that the gospel assures us that the Savior touches us and opens us to the boundless stretch of grace. And, as members of Christ's community, we will remind each other of life's persistence, even as we stand in the shadow of the Lenten cross. And, as we do, we, like the Samaritan woman, will hear Jesus graciously validating our words, saying, "What you have said is quite true."

Notes

1 Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, The New Interpreter's Bible 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 567.

2 Serene Jones, "Rupture," in *Hope Deferred: Heart Healing Reflections on Reproductive Loss*, ed. by Nadine Frantz and Mary T. Stimming (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 49.