

If we had to tell the story of God's relationship with humanity in just a few words, we might say it's the ongoing tale of God's fidelity in love and humankind's infidelity and what we both do about it. The root of that infidelity, as the first reading tells us, is our inability or unwillingness to perceive and trust in God's abiding love. It can seem at times that God has given up on us, so we give up on God.

The story of the Samaritan Woman relates that story to us in a very symbolic way. As it turns out, the gospel story closely parallels the last chapters of the Second Book of Kings in the Old Testament. Allow me to explain briefly.

By the end of the Second Book of Kings, the kingdom of Israel had separated from the kingdom of Judah, politically and religiously. Israel's capital was in Samaria and the capital of Judah was Jerusalem. Each thought the other's form of worship was wrong. God's law was largely ignored.

Because of this, the Book of Kings reports, God became enraged at the tribes of Israel and thrust them away from himself. The term "God's rage" in the Bible is typically used as a way to translate into human terms the reason for whatever disaster happens to be in play. As Pope Benedict and many others have taught though, God always desires our salvation, not our complete destruction.¹

Did God smite the Israelites? Not exactly. Like us, the Israelites managed to arrange the smiting quite nicely all on their own. When we choose not to follow God and allow ourselves to become unaware of his loving presence in our lives, we

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110601.html,
March 10, 2020

risk suffering the consequences of that infidelity. It's perfectly normal human behavior at times like those to try to avoid confronting our own guilt and that's when we blame our misfortunes on an enraged God. It can seem as if God has given up on us. The truth's quite different – it's the exact opposite, isn't it? But that's not the way it looks to us in the moment.

Returning to the narrative in the Second Book of Kings, history tells us that the Assyrians had had enough of Israel's constant troublemaking and decided to invade the country and destroy it. In chapters 17 and 18 we read that people from five pagan cities were moved by the king of Assyria to Samaria, to integrate the remaining Israelites forcibly into Assyrian culture. Only Judah remained. Despite all the destruction, God promised that redemption would eventually come from Judah. In spite of that distant hope, it sure looked to the Israelites that God had given up on them.

Mapping this onto the story of the Samaritan Woman is pretty straightforward. Marriage is often used in the Bible as a metaphor to describe God's relationship with God's people, which more often than not is fraught with infidelity. That's the reason Jesus is speaking with a woman and not a man.

They're together at Jacob's well. Jacob was given the name Israel after wrestling with God one night. This fact, plus the identity of the woman as a Samaritan are the clues that tell us that this story's about Israel's infidelity to her covenant with God.

Her five husbands stand for those five pagan cities that were sent to resettle Samaria. The husband she has now is Rome. Israel's real spouse, the only one who

has ever truly cherished her, has always been God. The Samaritan Woman's inability to recognize Jesus is emblematic of Israel's persistent inability to recognize the presence of God within it.

As their dialog concludes, the Samaritan Woman excitedly goes off and tells her friends that this man, Jesus, knows everything about her. Could he be the messiah? Has God indeed not given up on his people?

Now comes the critical part of the story for you and me. The Samaritans invite Jesus to stay with them. As the encounter unfolds, they tell the woman they no longer believe in Jesus because of her report, but because they have come to believe by their own direct experience that God has not given up on them; Jesus is in fact the one mentioned in the Second Book of Kings, the savior promised by God.

You and I have heard about Jesus from other people too, but does our personal encounter with Jesus Christ through the Eucharist, Scripture, other folks and all of creation convince us that yes, although God is quite familiar with human infidelity in general and ours in particular, that giving up on us is simply not on God's agenda and never has been?

When we're convinced of that profound reality in our innermost being, we've taken a sip from the wellspring of eternal life, and will never thirst for love again.