

Go to the Gate

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent (Year A)

Exodus 17:1-7 | Psalm 95 | John 4:5-42

“Come, let us sing to the Lord!

Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” Amen

— — —

The poet Naomi Shihab Nye is stranded in the Albuquerque airport; her flight delayed four hours. She hears an announcement over the intercom:

“If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.”¹

And then she writes this line:

“Well — one pauses these days.”²

One pauses. Because it’s an airport, and she’s exhausted, and we live in the world we live in. She pauses. And then she goes. Because she has a basic understanding of Arabic. And because Gate A-4 is, as it turns out, her own gate.

She finds an older Palestinian woman in traditional embroidered dress, crumpled on the floor, wailing. The flight agents are baffled. “Talk to her,” they say. “What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”³

They had spoken to her. But not in a language she could hear. The older woman thought the flight had been cancelled. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. She was terrified and utterly alone in a system that was talking **at** her but not **to** her.

I want us to hold on to that image for a moment.

— — —

In Exodus, the Israelites are in the wilderness. They’ve been freed from Egypt — which sounds like the happy ending, except that freedom has led them to a place with no water. And God led them there. God led them to the place where there was no water.

The people cry out. They quarrel with Moses. They ask a raw, honest question: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

For centuries, preachers have called this a failure of faith. I wonder if it's actually a form of prayer — the only form they had available in that moment. They were crying out because they were facing death. And the text says God heard them. God didn't lecture them about gratitude. God gave them water from a rock. God was not, to use contemporary language, a **bystander**.

— — —

Psalm 95 starts as a joyful call to worship, in stark contrast to the wilderness experience. But then the psalm turns. A voice breaks in:

“Oh, that today, you would hearken to God's voice! Harden not your hearts...”

The Hebrew word for “hearken” (or “listen” or “hear”) in this text — *shamah* — means hearing that **changes** you. Hearing that you **act** on. It's the difference between “*We told her the flight was going to be late*” and someone kneeling down and speaking haltingly in her language.

And the psalm's warning is aimed at the people who showed up for worship. The ones who know the liturgy by heart. You — the psalm says to us — you are the ones in danger of hearing without responding. Of being, to use that word again, a **bystander**.

— — —

Which brings us to the well, and a conversation that shouldn't be happening.

Jesus is in Samaria. He's tired. He's thirsty. He has no bucket. A woman comes to draw water, and he says, “Give me a drink.”

We need to feel how wrong this is by the standards of his world. Jews and Samaritans had despised each other for centuries. The wounds were old and deep. And beyond that, a Jewish man simply did not speak to an unaccompanied woman in public.

And yet she doesn't walk away. She pushes back: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me?” She questions him. She engages theologically. She argues. And in the course of that exchange — that honest, messy, boundary-crossing exchange — Jesus makes the first explicit revelation of his identity in the entire Gospel of John. Not to the disciples. Not to a religious leader. To **her**.

I want to say something about this woman, because she's been preached as a sinner and a seductress for a very long time, and the text doesn't support it. Jesus never mentions sin. The word “sin” doesn't appear in this passage. In a culture where only men could

initiate divorce, her five marriages almost certainly reflect things that happened **to** her, not things she **chose**. Jesus affirms her honesty. The town listens to her. The Eastern Church venerates her as Saint Photini — “bringer of light” — and calls her equal to the apostles.

She is not a cautionary tale. She is the first evangelist. And she does her evangelism not by having all the answers, but by asking an honest question: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

She doesn’t declare. She invites. She tells what happened to her and leaves room for her neighbors to encounter Jesus for themselves. That question mark is what makes her testimony trustworthy — she’s not closing the deal, she’s opening a door. She was anything but a bystander.

— — —

You’ve been hearing about Hanna Reichel’s book *For Such a Time as This*. The second part of her book is called “*Hear the Word, or Listening and Responding*.” And the sections move from “*Mind the Power of Language*” to “*Protect the Weak*” to “*Stand Firm*” to “*Do Something Brave*.”

That’s a trajectory. Hearing leads somewhere. It moves your feet.

But Reichel also names what happens when it doesn’t — when we hear and stay put. She writes:

“Not speaking out does not make you neutral. It makes you a **bystander**.
No system of oppression can succeed at scale without **bystanders**.”⁴

Reichel is talking about the large and terrible things — the systems that grind people down while the rest of us look away.

At the same time, the bystander choice doesn’t only happen at that scale.

— — —

Back at Gate A-4 in the Albuquerque airport: poet Naomi Shihab Nye kneels down and speaks halting Arabic. The woman stops crying. They make phone calls — to the woman’s son, to Nye’s father who speaks fluent Arabic, to others. Two hours pass. And then the older woman pulls out a sack of traditional Palestinian homemade cookies — little powdered-sugar mounds stuffed with dates and nuts — and starts offering them to every woman at the gate.

Nye writes:

*“Not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo — we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling.”*⁵

An airport gate became a communion table. Because one person heard an announcement and, despite pausing — despite the fear that makes us all pause these days — she went.

Nye ends the story with this:

*“This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”*⁶

That’s not Easter. That’s Lent — the modest, middle-of-the-desert kind of hope. **Plenty** is lost. But not **everything**.

— — —

Do you hear the refrain this morning? Do you hear it in these readings? The Israelites cry out in a wilderness God led them to, and God doesn’t scold them — God gives water from a rock. A woman comes to a well for water and leaves carrying a question that changes her whole town. Naomi Shihab Nye heard an announcement in an airport and she went to the gate.

In each case, someone hears — and what they hear moves their feet.

Hanna Reichel ends the second part of her book with this simple, plaintive admonition:

*“For God’s sake, don’t be a **bystander**.”*⁷

Amen.

¹ Naomi Shihab Nye, *Gate A-4*, in *Honeybee: Poems & Short Prose*, Greenwillow, 2008, pages 162–164

² Naomi Shihab Nye, *Gate A-4*

³ Naomi Shihab Nye, *Gate A-4*

⁴ Hanna Reichel, *For Such a Time as This, An Emergency Devotional*, Eerdmans, page 69

⁵ Naomi Shihab Nye, *Gate A-4*

⁶ Naomi Shihab Nye, *Gate A-4*

⁷ Hanna Reichel, page 71