

Jesus' surprising offer of living cocaine in John 4:

contextual encounters at the well with Latino inmates in US jails

by Bob Ekblad

Intercultural reading of the Bible demonstrates that reading strategies and interpretations vary widely and are relevant to reading communities to the extent that they are faithful to the text, the social context of the group, and the daily lives and concerns of individual readers. In this article I seek to include the perspectives of Latino immigrant inmates who participated in the Intercultural Reading of the Bible Project. How might these people identify the contemporary equivalent of the well and water in their communities and lives? Where are today's wells where contemporary Samaritans might quench their thirst in their encounter with the Word become flesh? What is the role of the facilitator among people who are mostly first-time Bible readers, are outside the church, and often consider themselves condemned by God and unable to change?

As part-time chaplain of a jail in Washington State I meet with Mexican and American inmates twice weekly to read and discuss our questions, the Scriptures and to pray. I met two times with two different groups to discuss the encounter between the Samaritan woman and Jesus in John 4 with hopes of forming partnerships with other reading communities through the Intercultural Reading of the Bible Project. Several insurmountable difficulties made it impossible for me to fully incorporate this group into the project through partnering with other groups. However due to the richness of our discussions, the fruitfulness of several emphases, and the unique perspective of the men with whom I read, I will present one feature of this story that particularly engages men in jail: the symbolic function of the well as place of encounter par excellence between Jesus and the excluded.

Leading Bible studies in a jail presents special challenges to the facilitator that are similar but also different from those encountered in more stable prison environments where people have already been sentenced and are doing their time. Our Bible study group changes from week to week as new inmates arrive and others are sent to prison, deported or released. County jails function in the United States as maximum security detention centers where people arrested for crimes committed in the immediate area of the county are held until charged, tried and sentenced. Those with financial means are allowed to post bail and remain free until their sentencing or acquittal. Those unable to come up with bail money are confined until they

have either been acquitted of their charges or have served their time. People charged with misdemeanors can be sentenced to anywhere from one to 364 days in the county jail. People charged with more serious crimes can spend anywhere from two months to a year negotiating a plea agreement with the prosecutors or fighting to overturn their charges by trial. If the judge sentences someone to anything less than one year, the convicted serve their time there in the county jail. Any sentence over one year is served in one of Washington State's many state prisons. In addition, the jail serves as a holding facility for immigrants detained by the Department of Homeland Security for deportation or to serve federal prison time for repeated illegal entry as criminal aliens.

Jail inmates are often in a state of uncertainty and crisis. In addition, many find themselves incarcerated together with enemies from the streets. Tensions between individuals, people's emotional instability due to stress from family crisis, court troubles, or detoxing from drugs or alcohol require very deliberate and often directive facilitation and more crafted, time-limited Bible studies.

Privacy issues and jail rules further limit the possibilities of verbatim recording of Bible studies. Even if they were permitted, recording devices would inhibit people's participation, as anything they said could be subpoenaed for use against the defendant in court. The voices of the inmate participants included in this article were written down from memory outside the jail and then translated into English.

As I prepare to facilitate a Bible study on John 4 in Skagit County Jail it is easy to notice that my own social location among Latino immigrant inmates loosely parallels Jesus' status before the Samaritan woman. As a Caucasian, English-speaking, US citizen, educated, male I represent the dominant mainstream American culture in a way loosely paralleling Jesus' Jewish, male identity. My parents were both born in the United States. My grandfather on my father's side migrated from Sweden in the first decade of the twentieth century, while on my mother's side my descendants go back to some of the first English settlers in the 1700s. I grew up as a fairly privileged member of the dominant US ethnicity, and benefited from many opportunities, including an undergraduate and graduate education. I now am an ordained Presbyterian pastor, jail chaplain and director of an ecumenical ministry to immigrants called Tierra Nueva (New Earth).

My corresponding passing through Samaria and sitting by the well began in 1981 with a life-changing trip to Central America. Encounters with contemporary equivalents of the

Samaritan women now consist in weekly Spanish-English Bible studies in the jail and with Latino immigrants at Tierra Nueva's Family Support Center. Every Thursday evening and Sunday afternoon uniformed jail guards usher me through the thick steel doors into the jail's multipurpose room to meet with 10-30 men. The guards then corral red-uniformed inmates through two steel doors take their places in the circle of blue plastic chairs where we sit and read the Bible together.

The men with whom I read more closely resemble Samaritan villagers than I embody Jesus. Many are originally peasants from impoverished rural villages in Mexico. Pushed away by landlessness, drought, unemployment, government neglect and global market forces, they are drawn to the perceived bounty of El Norte (the USA)—a modern-day well of sorts. Once in the United States they find work as farm laborers or minimum-wage restaurant, construction or factory workers. Their willingness to work hard for low wages makes them invaluable to the US economy. Many have entered the United States illegally, and live on the margins of American society. Others are second-generation immigrants identified by first generation immigrants as "pochos" or "cholos," if they belong to a gang. Many do not have valid driver's licenses or even identification and make use of counterfeit residency and social security cards. Others have had their drivers licenses confiscated due to driving offences and have alias names in an attempt to escape arrest for active warrants or known illegal immigration status. Most have partners and children to support, sometimes in Mexico and in the USA. This is a near impossible feat when making minimum wage. Many people are tempted and succumb to small-scale drug dealing for extra cash. This often leads people into more serious drug dealing. Theirs' is a life of constant insecurity. If ever arrested for anything undocumented immigrants can be assured that they will be deported by the Department of Homeland Security back to Mexico immediately after doing their jail time.

The visible gap between me as facilitator and my immigrant - inmate reading community has often provoked new insights that have proved fruitful in engaging people in reflection on particular texts. An event associated with a Bible study on John 4 several years before the launching of the Intercultural Reading of the Bible Project inspired my later reflections on the symbolic function of the well. This event illustrates the special challenges that can require a more directive facilitation style and the urgency of coming up with contextualized interpretation, one way or another.

During one of my Thursday evening Bible studies eight years or so ago some 30 inmates bustled into the jail's multipurpose room and the guards shut the doors, locking us in the

room together. I had arranged the plastic chairs in a large circle. Once seated I invited the men to pray with me for God to send the Spirit to illuminate our reading and discussion. I noticed from the start that there was an uneasy tension in the room as finished the prayer invoking the Holy Spirit. On this occasion I invited a volunteer to read John 4:1-15.

During the reading and immediately afterwards I found myself distracted by a number of people's nervous glances and aggressive glares. Several pairs of men talked softly to each other. Pukie, a mustached gang member in his early twenties with his shoulder heavily bandaged from a gun shot wound he acquired in an attempt to rob at gunpoint the home of another drug dealer looked especially agitated. Stimy, a heavily-tattooed young white guy on his way to six years in prison for a drive-by shooting sits sullenly in the middle of the men to my left.

I reach into my store of methods for engaging distracted people, directing my first questions to people who were talking or glaring. "Who are the participants in this story?" When nobody answered I invite Pukie, the most agitated in the group, to reread John 4:4-8, and then ask the men again to identify the story's characters. After getting feeble responses I continued with my questions, addressing this one to Stimy: "So where are they and what's happening in this story?"

"Shit I don't know man, I wasn't paying attention," says Stimy, looking down at his Bible. "At some well, I guess, talking and shit."

While these questions work to some extent, people were less engaged than I could ever remember and tensions continued to mount. I am increasingly aware that I need either more engaging questions or an attention-grabbing story to captivate their interest. In a last ditch effort to salvage a Bible study that was spinning out of control I launch into my own contextual interpretation in a more monologuing, even preaching style.

Since I know that many of the men in the group are long-time drug dealers and/or addicts I invite the men to imagine that they are selling drugs out of their apartment, a quickly-grasped attempt to present a contemporary equivalent to the well. I am drawing on my experience talking with hundreds of addicts about their desperation to acquire more crack cocaine, which often propels them into selling drugs themselves to assure their own supply. Most local dealers who operate out of low income apartments or motels.

“So there you are, and Jesus comes up to your door, but you don’t know who he is. He just looks like some normal gabacho (white person), maybe like me. He says, “hey, sell me some coke,” or “sell me some crack.”

The men all look at me, some smiling uneasily, others clearly wondering what I am going to say next.

I continue my monologue, suggesting what I imagine that Latino drug dealers -Samaritan women might be thinking.

“You wonder if you can trust him, and inside you are thinking this is an undercover drug task force officer trying to make a sting operation. You say to him: “No way man, I can’t help you,” and wish he’d just go away. But he keeps insisting on talking with you.

“Hey, listen,” he tells you. “If you knew God’s gift and if you knew who it is who is asking you to sell him some cocaine, you’d ask him and he would give you living crack. Because the crack that you smoke only gives you a high for a moment, and you have to keep buying more, but the coke that I will give you will give you a permanent high.”

Many of the men have raised eyebrows, and seem surprised, even shocked. I suggest at this moment that this story shows us that Jesus comes to us where we are and respect us. Many of the men though are fidgeting nervously and glancing across the circle and then down. Willie, a Chicano gang member I have been meeting one-on-one with, who is sitting beside me, taps me on the shoulder and insists that he wants to go back to his cell.

“We need to wrap this up Roberto, now” he tells me with urgency in his voice.

I tell the men that it appears we’re all having a hard time getting focused, and that maybe we should end our study early. I invite them to stand and pray the Lord’s Prayer together in Spanish.

Everyone stands and I close my eyes and begin the prayer. Right away I notice that only a few people are praying with me and I hear increasing rustling around me. I speed up my prayer and race for the closing “libranos del mal” deliver us from evil—the official ending of the Roman Catholic Spanish version of the prayer. I open my eyes to a scene of terror.

The men to my left all have blue plastic chairs raised over their heads, the metal legs ready to crash down upon the men on my right, whose chairs are all in different stages of being raised. A Native American man has a leaded microphone jack raised above his head like a tomahawk ready to come down on Willie's head. I walk quickly through the middle of the crowd to the buzzer on the wall that calls the guards. Almost instantly they are on the scene, hustling the men against the wall and out the doors into their pods. I stand there stunned, my heart beating wildly, feeling foolish and impotent. The guards usher me out and I drive home completely dejected. The next morning I call into the jail and ask to speak with Willie.

He immediately begins apologizing and then starts to cry. "I'm so sorry Roberto. It was my fault. I had it all planned with my homeboys, the nortenos. We were all going to jump the others there in the group who were sudenos. One of them had insulted Stimy, saying his girl friend was pregnant with someone else's baby. We don't take those kinds of insults lightly. We had it all planned to fight them right at the beginning of the study, but didn't out of respect for you. Man, I'm really sorry for what happened. That Bible study though has been going through my mind all night. Mostly though I want to thank you for your prayer. That prayer stopped everything man," he concluded.

"Prayer, what prayer?" I ask. "You know, that prayer right at the end."

"What do you mean it stopped everything?" I ask.

Willie alerts me to the fact that nobody hit anyone, that everyone had their chairs raised over their heads ready to fight, but that he had felt completely paralyzed, unable to move the moment that I had finished my prayer.

I think back to the night before and recall that there were in fact no blows that I could remember. I had walked right through the middle of the warring gangs to buzz for the guards. "Libranos del mal – deliver us from evil" had been my last words. I find Willie's explanation unbelievable but intriguing and thank him and tell him that I didn't hold anything against him. After hanging up I call Pukie, who tells me nearly the same thing. That the Bible study was in his head all night and thanks for the prayer that stopped everything. The story spreads through the jail and then the Latino community about how the pastor stopped a gang confrontation with a prayer. This event clearly engraved both a particular way to contextualize John 4 and the power of the ending of the Lord's Prayer into my heart. At the same time I recognize the limitations of a monologue, seeking ways to engage people that

help them identify contemporary equivalents of the Bible characters, movements and geography in their own lives and communities.

The studies I led two years ago with Latino immigrants in the jail with the Intercultural Reading of the Bible Project clearly benefited from this earlier experience. There in the face of escalating tensions, I felt an urgent need for the Bible story to somehow become more obviously relevant through some sort of immediate relectura or actualization. I also am convinced that there is a place for the facilitator to take the initiative in introducing contextual readings that go beyond people's natural expectations, grabbing their attention in a way that penetrates through their indifference. While a contemporary rereading was not enough to stop the confrontation from erupting, it may have held it at bay until God became more fully present in response to our prayer.

In preparation for my more recent Bible study studies on John 4 I ponder the most accessible launching point in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. The actual location of the encounter where Jesus offers living water provides a fruitful metaphor upon which I as facilitator can invite people to a contemplative site for possible contemporary meetings between today's Samaritans and Jesus. The deeper meaning of the well, its location outside the town and most importantly its symbolic distantiation from any official religious place where "sinners" would typically expect to meet God offers a surprise to people who feel unworthy of approaching God in traditional "holy" places.

Jesus' surprising presence among people who are not engaged in overtly religious behavior in non-religious places is a consistent theme in the stories surrounding John 4. The reader of John's Gospel is alerted to Jesus' incognito presence right from the start with statements like "he was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him" (Jn 1:10). John's description of the word becoming flesh and dwelling (literally pitching its tent) among us (Jn 1:14) invites the reader to identify God as present and moving with humans. John goes on to describe Jesus showing up outside the traditional religious places when people are going about their lives. The first sign of turning water into wine takes place at a wedding (Jn 2:1-12). Nicodemus comes to him by night (Jn 3:2), the official appeals to him at Cana and his son does nothing, being healed from a distance in Jesus' absence. Jesus meets the paralytic while he is laying beside the pool—a place symbolic of wherever people have been living in frustrated expectation of finding relief. He feeds the five thousand on a mountain while they are sitting passively with no apparent faith (Jn 6:1-14). The adulterous woman is defended and pardoned outside of religious places without her taking any initiative

(Jn 8:1-11) as is the man born blind (Jn 9:1-12) and Lazarus (Jn 11:1-46). These details are highly significant for people on the margins of society and church, who assume that their salvation depends entirely on their going to the right places and doing the right things.

In my Bible studies on John 4 with inmates or others I work with who consider themselves excluded by the church or dominant culture I typically begin with either a first question regarding their lives and world, or with a brief question regarding the narrative detail of the text—specifically the characters and geography. With people who I suspect feel wary of anything religious who may well assume that the Biblical story is irrelevant, I usually begin with a question about their lives and values. In the following composite of two different jail Bible studies with Latino inmates the text appeared to provide an ideal jumping off place to talk about our lives as it introduces the well.

In both of my studies for the Intercultural Reading of the Bible Project in the jail I begin with a prayer for God to send the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds and then invite a volunteer to read John 4:1-4 before briefly commenting on Jesus' passing through Samaria. I give them a brief description of behind the text information about Samaria, its location outside of acceptable Jewish religious places, and the religious and ethnic divisions that existed between Jews and Samaritans that do not keep Jesus from showing up.

I ask another volunteer to read John 4:5-8 and ask some basic questions to get people to pay attention to some of the narrative detail in this evolving story.

“Who are the characters in this story and what do we know about them up to this point?” I ask.

“There's Jesus, who has been passing through Samaria and sits by a well tired and thirsty,” someone says.

“Then who comes along?” I probe, inviting the men to look back down at their Bibles.

“There's a Samaritan woman who comes to draw water,” someone responds.

I talk briefly about the importance of wells for people in the first century. “Everyone needed water to meet their most basic needs: to quench their thirst, water their animals, irrigate any crops, wash their clothes and bodies”, I say.

“Do any of you go to wells to meet your most basic needs?” I ask, a question that I know will acknowledge our distance from the world of the text.

They shake their heads and someone answers the obvious. “None of us.”

“So where do you go when you are thirsty for something, or when you are seeking to meet your most urgent needs?” I ask, seeking to inspire reflection on possible contemporary equivalents.

“I go to church,” says a man who is a newcomer to our jail Bible study group. While this may indeed be where he would go, I suspect that he is trying to please me and God by giving the spiritually correct answer.

If people look uncertain about what I am trying to ask or are not feeling enough trust to answer honestly I often re-phrase the question.

“What do people you know do or where do they go to find satisfaction, to meet their needs?” Or, “if you were released right now for 24 hours where are the first three places you’d go?”

“To the bar,” says a Mexican farm worker in his early thirties. People smile and some nod.

“I’d go to my girl friends place man,” says a young Chicano gangster known as Neeners. Neeners has 666 tattooed under his lower lip and the names of past girl friends tattooed on his neck. People laugh and nod their agreement.

“To the crack house,” says a heavily-tattooed Chicano man. A number of men rock back in their plastic chairs and laugh.

“Hey wait a minute,” interjects Neeners. “You may not believe this, but I go to jail to get my real needs met.” This is the only place right here where I feel like I can think straight and get my shit together. Coming in here to study the Bible and shit helps me gain a new perspective,” he says.

These answers loosen up the group, and men mention other places they frequent or activities: the mall, heroin, sex, music, family, dealing drugs, cars, work, partying, dancing.

“So do these places and activities give you total satisfaction?” I ask. “Do you feel like you are able to meet your needs?” I continue.

“No way homes,” says Ben. “Look, here we are, all of us stuck in here. I ain’t satisfied by my life, not out there, not in here. None of us are.”

Ben’s answer seems to resonate with most of the men, who nod their agreement that nothing really satisfies them.

“I’ve had everything money can buy: cars, women, drugs, money, jewelry. I’ve never been satisfied,” says someone. “I know that I’m still thirsty for something.

Others nod their heads in agreement.

“So, the woman from Samaria shows up at the well to get the water she needs to survive, and Jesus is already there,” I summarize. “What might this mean for us?” I ask. “If this story tells us where Jesus hung out back then, what does it suggest about where we might run into Jesus now?” I ask.

The men are tentative in responding to the obvious. They look at me and down at their Bibles awkwardly, afraid to say something blasphemous. They start with safer responses.

“Could this be saying that Jesus may come to us when we are out working?” someone asks.

“Well, if that is a place where you are seeking to meet your needs, the place where you work would be a sort of well. Where else do you go to satisfy your needs, to quench your thirst?” I probe.

Eyebrows are raised and I see some slow nods and slight smiles. However at this point I am aware that I am running into serious resistance from a dominant theology deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of Latino immigrants and most Caucasian men and women on the margins of North American society. The dominant theology envisions God as being found in Catholic or evangelical churches, and other religious places, or far away in heaven looking at the earth from a distance. Some may envision God as being near a religious shrine in the corner of their home, when candles are lit before the Virgin of Guadalupe or other saints. No

one would naturally envision God as meeting them at the above mentioned places where they would actually frequent to meet their actual physical and psychological urges.

The Bible is another place that people would naturally view as a sacred site for God's presence. However, most inmates assume that the Bible is too holy a place for them to feel welcomed into. The Bible is not viewed as containing refreshing, surprising good news for people like them. The only people who might hear good news are good people who are complying with God's infinite demands. Many Latino inmates fear that the Bible will confirm their worst fears: that they are damned because they cannot succeed at obeying the rules or because they avoid exposing themselves to new demands. Do this, believe that...change or else. The Bible is not viewed as offering anything that would meet any of their most pressing needs. Consequently whoever facilitates the Bible study is viewed as someone who invites them into a foreign, irrelevant place associated with punishment for crimes committed. People's first time attendance at my Bible studies are often motivated by their boredom with the monotonous life in their cell blocks or by their sense of desperation leading them to do everything possible to comply with God's demands that they comply with religious demands.

"If today's wells are places where we go to quench our thirst like bars, crack houses, and meth labs, what do you think of Jesus' question to the woman: "Give me a drink"? I ask, inviting a direct confrontation with the dominant theology.

I believe that my question which overtly invites people to interpret Jesus' presence in a way that challenges the dominant theology directly parallels Jesus' provocative request to the Samaritan woman: "give me a drink" (4:7). My inmate Bible study participants often fear departing from the official transcript, especially when they are detained by the State, which appears to have received power sanctioned by the all-powerful God. Standing with Jesus whose request shows total solidarity with them in their thirst is a challenge to the entire system. Embracing this challenge appears risky. What if God in fact legitimates and upholds the power of the State? Their embracing of a God with them right where they are rather than renouncing their wells in breast-beating repentance may be perceived to lead to further sanctions in the form of more jail time or a guaranteed deportation.

The woman's response to Jesus parallels inmates gut response to the interpretation I suggest. I ask a volunteer to read John 4:9.

The Samaritan woman therefore said to him, “how is it that you, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?”(For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans).

The woman’s questioning of Jesus’ openness to her reflects both her and inmate equivalent Samaritans recognition that they are being called to ignore traditional boundaries. She reflects a hesitancy to move beyond the official transcript. At the same time, her hidden transcript apparently is not as risky as Jesus’. Jesus, a Jewish male who would normally view himself as superior to and forever separate from an unclean Samaritan woman is willing to receive from and drink her water.

“Let’s see how Jesus responds to the woman?” I suggest, inviting someone to read John 4:10.

I invite the men to imagine what Jesus’ offer of living water might sound like to them, if he were to actually meet them at their particular wells where they actually go to quench their thirst.

Knowing full well that I am inviting people to risk blasphemy, I myself suggest a contextual rereading of this verse based on one of the men’s identification of the crack house as his well.

Is it possible that Jesus’ answer might sound something like this,” I ask. “If you knew the gift of God, and who is who says to you, ‘Give me some cocaine,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living cocaine”?

The men smile hesitantly at first and then begin to see that indeed Jesus is not taking the expected sermonizing, judging tone they assume he would have. Nor am I. When we read on in John 4:13-14 “everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life” the men can see that Jesus is talking about more than actual water, cocaine, or whatever the contemporary equivalent of the contents in the well might be. At the same time, to help people identify God’s surprising presence there outside the religious spaces where they would least expect God, I ask another question.

“Have any of you experienced God as being present with you in a positive, helpful way while your were drinking or doing drugs?”

Several men start talking at the same time, feeling permission to express a hidden transcript that they had never expressed public ally to anyone. Arnold tells of how he would often drive home after drinking and doing drugs and that he never got in an accident even though in the morning he would have no memory of having driven his car the night before. Another man tells about how God speaks to him when he is high, making him feel a hunger for God's Presence and for reading the Bible. Neeners tells about how as a teenager he prayed to God while he was stealing car stereos that he would not be caught, and how he felt God's protection. Another man mentions that is a miracle that he and many of them are alive at all. He went on to tell the group how he is sure that if the police had not arrested him and brought him to the jail this time, he would be dead from an overdose. God allowed me to be arrested to save my life and bring me here to get closer to God. Through these stories the men identify God as a gracious presence who accompanies them despite their crimes and brokenness.

When we read together Jesus' order for her to return for the living water with her husband and note that Jesus' offer was given with full knowledge that she had had five husbands, the men become more confident that this new theology may be believable.

"So if Jesus reveals God's true identity, as it says in different places in John's Gospel, what is God like according to this story, "I ask, inviting the men to summarize this positive theology for themselves.

"Jesus comes to people right where they are, no matter what they're doing or if they're messed up and shit," says Neeners.

"He offered living water to the woman even though he knew she'd lived a bad life and without making her change first," says someone else.

The men are visibly moved as we glimpse together Jesus' startling solidarity with people as apparently messed up as this Samaritan woman. Jesus seems more approachable now that they have seen his offer of living water, no strings attached to an undeserving woman.

I ask the men how many of them feel thirsty, desirous of this living water that Jesus offers. Everyone raises their hand or nods. An idea pops into my head that seems rather extreme but still appropriate.

I invite the men to imagine a 40 ounce can of the least expensive and highest alcohol content

malt liquor preferred by people on the street known as a “forty.” I invite them to imagine that it contains the living water that Jesus offers that will permanently quench their thirst instead of the old, well-known malt liquor. At this point everyone is clear that the living water Jesus offers is not actual water much as the malt liquor equivalent I invite them to drink is not literal malt liquor. I invite them to pop off the top and raise it up and drink freely together as I pray. Everyone pops the tops and we raise up our imaginary cans together over our mouths while I pray: “Jesus we receive your gift of living water. We drink it down into our beings. Satisfy us with your loving, gracious Presence.”

Everyone crosses themselves in a way that I have come to recognize means they have been deeply touched. I leave for home feeling like I have shared living water at a place that functions regularly like a life-giving well for me: Skagit County Jail. I return again the next Sunday, hoping that trust has grown between them and God, each other, the Bible and myself as pastor and facilitator. My hope is that my presence, however directive or incomplete, would somehow fit within the company of Jesus and the woman, who both in their own ways bring people into authentic encounters with the source of living water.