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Taking a new approach to the Bible this Lent

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NCR Today

Lent is not my favorite time of the liturgical year. I've always been more of an Advent person and never understood some of my fellow Catholics' actual joy during the 40 days preceding Easter. Call me a Lent weakling.

This year, however, I took up a challenge offered by Christian author and speaker Margaret Feinberg to read the New Testament straight through during Lent. I've read the Bible before but never this way. It has given me a purpose during these 40 days that keeps me from focusing on the sugar withdrawals I'm having. So far, doing this Bible journey seems to be working on lots of levels.

One of the great things about reading the New Testament straight through instead of the sliced-and-diced version offered throughout the three-year cycle of Mass readings is seeing, once again, how Jesus is portrayed in each of the Gospels. The scholar notes are particularly illuminating, especially in the Gospel of John, which we've been reading this week.

Two notes regarding the story of Jesus interacting with the Samaritan woman at the well really struck me. The first comes at John 4:27, where the disciples were "amazed" that Jesus was speaking to a woman. The note on that line reads, "*Talking with a woman*: a religious and social restriction that Jesus is pictured treating as unimportant."

The second comes at John 4:39, which reports that many people from the woman's hometown came to believe in Jesus because of what she told them after her encounter with him. The scholar note on that line reads, "The woman is presented as a missionary."

This story was Saturday's Gospel reading and came on the heels of the news that Pope Francis has appointed the first eight members to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, it seemed

oddly appropriate. Of the commission's initial members, four are women. More importantly, one of the women is a victim of priestly abuse.

Francis has rightly been criticized for his lack of action on the clergy sex abuse crisis. Appointing women to this commission, and a victim at that, is a huge step in the right direction. Maybe the pope, like Jesus with the Samaritan woman and John's reporting on her missionary zeal, is sending a message about the importance of women's voices. I hope so, because it is long overdue.

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