

Living the Truth

Third Sunday of Lent

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VA

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN.

Exodus 17:1-7 (NRSV)

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Romans 5:1-11 (NRSV)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our

sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.⁹ Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.¹⁰ For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.¹¹ But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

John 4:5-42 (NRSV)

[Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet."²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."²⁷ Just then

his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?”²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,²⁹ “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.”³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.³⁵ Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.³⁷ For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word.⁴² They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Water stands out in two of our lessons this morning. In Exodus, Moses strikes the rock to get water for the Israelites. The scene in our gospel reading takes place at Jacob's well. Jesus tells a Samaritan woman he can supply people with water that will make it so she'll never be thirsty again. He says, **“The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”** You're probably aware that “living water” is one of Jesus' metaphors for the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who comes into us and gives us God's own life, eternal life.

But before we get to how Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit, I'd like to step back for a minute and look at the cultural context for Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman. “Samaritan” describes both a location and a religious group. Samaria was an area to the north of Judah and Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples are passing through it

on their way to Galilee. It is a gross understatement to say that there was no love lost between the Jewish people and the Samaritans. When Jesus asks the woman for a drink from the well, she is surprised. He says he can give her living water, and she wonders how, since he has no bucket. She's implying of course, he should provide his own bucket, because no self-respecting Jew would use her Samaritan bucket.

Both the Jews and the Samaritans had cultural hatred for each other going back hundreds of years. This was fueled by their religious differences. They each fervently believed centuries-old stories about where the other group came from. The Jews believed the Samaritans were racially impure heretics. They believed they were the remnants of the ten tribes that were taken into captivity when the northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. They believed the Samaritans were descended from the Jews who were left behind, who intermarried with the Gentile inhabitants of the area. What's worse, the Samaritans practiced a corrupt form of Judaism. They rejected everything in the Hebrew Scriptures except the first five books, the books of Moses. And they worshiped at a shrine on Mt. Gerizim, not in Jerusalem. In 128 B.C. the Jewish high priest and leader John Hyrcanus destroyed their temple there because the Samaritans refused to convert to Judaism.

For their part, the Samaritans believed that the high priesthood of the Jews was illegitimate because Jewish high priests were descended from the wrong son of Aaron. They believed that through Jacob God had commanded that Shechem, on Mt. Gerizim,

be their center of worship, not the temple in Jerusalem. Jacob's well, where this conversation takes place, was near the Samaritan shrine. The Samaritans believed this made all Jewish history and worship after Moses hopelessly illegitimate, which explains why they believed only the books of Moses.

This is the cultural background of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, and later with all her fellow villagers as well. But you'll notice that Jesus doesn't take sides in this dispute, other than to tell the woman, **"You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."** He prefaces that remark by saying that the time will come when people, including Samaritans, will worship the Father neither in Jerusalem or on Mt. Gerizim. Instead, **"the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him."**

In the cultural context of first-century Palestine, Jesus was breaking a strongly-held social taboo by even traveling through Samaria. But Jesus goes even farther by talking to one of the inhabitants, and a woman at that! This is why the disciples are so sheepishly silent: John tells us, **"They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?'"**

By now the disciples are realizing they are following someone who marches to a very different drum. Jesus is Jewish, but he's not out to convince this Samaritan woman that she's wrong and he and his Jewish community are right. Instead, he predicts that

there will come a time when people he calls **“the true worshipers”** will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, and it won’t be either in Jerusalem or on Mt. Gerizim.

Jesus is looking ahead to his crucifixion, resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all people, from every ethnic group, who put their faith in him anywhere in the world. In fact, he predicts that the Samaritans will believe in him—which they do, to the point where he stays two days in their village. It’s no accident that after his resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples: **“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8 NRSV) And the apostles do what they’re told. In the eighth chapter of Acts, Philip has great success proclaiming the gospel in Samaria.

This feud between the Jews and the Samaritans in the first century is no different than hatred between other groups in other places throughout human history. Or in our country today. Frequently one group will believe a narrative about another group that is untrue. Why? Because it serves the first group in some way. It gives them a convenient shorthand way to stereotype or pigeonhole members of the other group. It might advance some agenda the first group is pursuing. It justifies the first group in looking down on the other group. It promotes solidarity among the members of the first group—you know, “we’re not like them.” And of course, individuals do the same thing.

It's just easier to believe falsehoods about other groups or other people than to do the hard work of getting to know them and be in relationship with them.

Believing falsehoods about other people or groups is sinful, but it's even worse when you say God's on your side. I'm reminded of a strange encounter Joshua had just before he and the Israelite army were to attack Jericho. He comes upon a man standing with a sword drawn in his hand. The Bible says, **“Joshua went to him and said to him, ‘Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?’ He replied, ‘Neither; but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.’ And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and he said to him, ‘What do you command your servant, my lord?’ The commander of the army of the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy.’ And Joshua did so.”** (Joshua 5:13b-15 NRSV)

Jesus and Joshua are teaching us the same lesson: that when we have conflict with other people, real or imagined, God is not on our side. And they're much more likely to be imagined than real. God is on nobody's side but his own. We are not right and those other people are wrong. We are all wrong. Only God is right.

That is why God became a human being in Jesus—to take all our wrongs and wrongness on himself on the cross and put them to death, and sink them in the grave. But then he rose from the dead and took us with himself into heaven, from where he has poured out the Holy Spirit, the living water that is his own life. Jesus offers his life to us

every day, all the time. But we need to repent of thinking we are right and they—
whomever they are—are wrong. Like Joshua we need to fall at the feet of the Lord. We
need God’s weapon—the death of Jesus for our sins—to win the battle against our own
sins and the sin in this world.

Lent is the time when we reflect on these things. Let us pray.

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both
outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities
which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the
soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one
God, for ever and ever. **AMEN.**