

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 23, 2014
Third Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-30

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton once observed that “the essence of sin is ingratitude.” If one ever needed evidence or proof of that maxim, one would not need to look further than today’s Old Testament lesson from Exodus.

The children of Israel are on the move. God has rescued them from slavery in Egypt and is leading them toward the land of Promise. But the road from Egypt to the Promised land is not exactly a straight line from point A to point B. Deliverance from slavery is a wonderful thing, but the children of Israel also find their equilibrium upset, because their new life requires a *daily* trust and commitment in God that tests them to their very core.

They are moving from place to place, from camp to camp, and every day is a new adventure, a new venture into the unknown. Every day they must trust in God for the bare necessities. Days turn to weeks, and weeks turn to months, and before long you have a group of people who are having a real hard time trying to “accentuate the positive.”

When they arrive at Rephidim, they discover what appears to be a real “deal breaker.” There is no water.

So they come together, and they complain or “murmur” against Moses: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us?”

Moses responds, “Why are you arguing with me and testing the Lord?”

“No, we’re serious,” they respond. “We’re all going to die out here in this Godforsaken wilderness. We need some water.”

So Moses pleads with the Lord and prays, and God instructs him to take his shepherd’s staff and strike the rock near Mt. Sinai. He does so, and water gushes forth as the people stand by and watch, bewildered.

This is amazing, of course, not just because of the miracle, but because water in the Old Testament is also seen as a metaphor for the satisfaction of spiritual needs. Psalm 23:2 says, “He leads me besides still waters.” Psalm 42:1 says, “As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” And Isaiah 12:3 says, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

But even more amazing to me is how Moses memorializes the event by the names he gives to the place. One might think he would name the place “The Water Rock” or “The Place of Living Water” or “Streams of Mercy.”

He does not. He names the place *Massah* and *Meribah* -- the place of testing and the place of arguing -- because the people argued with Moses and tested the

Lord. What a sad thing that Moses' memory of this great event is the memory of people who are petty, ungrateful, and downright mean. A people who've *tasted* freedom from slavery, but who've also *tested* the patience of God because of their lack of faith.

Now, come with me to our Gospel lesson from John 4. Jesus has left Judea in order to go North to Galilee. On his way, the text tells us in verse 4 (not in our reading) that Jesus *has* to pass through Samaria. In Samaria, Jesus meets a woman at Jacob's well in the village of Sychar. He strikes up a conversation with her, and this becomes the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and an individual in the New Testament.

This is striking, because it's amazing that the conversation happens at all. You have a man and a woman together, in public. The man is a Jew, the woman, a Samaritan. The man is a transient passing through, the woman a resident.

We don't know the details of this woman's life and relationships, but we know that she was definitely on the margins. Respectable women would come to the well to draw water in the morning, where they would greet one another and talk about the news and whatever else was happening in the village.

But this woman was probably one the others talked *about*, and the fact that she shows up at noon in the heat of the day was a sure sign that she was not welcome in the morning when the others gathered.

She's been married five times, and even though we don't know the particulars about those relationships and it's unwarranted for us to draw conclusions, we are happy to do so anyway, and to mutter under our breath and wrinkle our eyebrows at such a lifestyle.

This woman had three strikes against her. She was a woman, she was a Samaritan, and she had been married five times and was working on relationship number six.

But consider this possibility. This woman has most likely been widowed or divorced (much the same thing at this time, for either way she was abandoned) five times and is now likely dependent on another for subsistence. So Jesus is *not* necessarily uncovering a shameful past or exposing her life of sin when he says she has had five husbands and the man she is living with now is not her husband.

Contrary to what we might have always thought with respect to this woman, it's very likely that Jesus is *not* chastising her or calling her to account. Rather, he truly *sees* her. He sees her with eyes of love and compassion, naming and understanding her circumstances. Perhaps this is why she calls him a prophet and risks asking him the central question that divides Samaritans and Jews: the question of where it is proper to worship.

So when John tells us early in the text that Jesus *had* to go through Samaria, that's what he means. He doesn't mean it as a geographical necessity because the road leading to Galilee happens to pass through Samaria. He means that Jesus *had* to go through Samaria because God was up to something.

Do you remember the words of the risen Jesus to his disciples just prior to the Spirit coming at Pentecost? He tells them: "you will be my witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem, then to Judea, to Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth."

Did you catch that? Jerusalem, Judea, SAMARIA. Jesus is telling the disciples that when the wind of the Spirit blows it will leave no place untouched -- *even places we would consider off-limits, and persons we would consider unreachable.*

I think Jesus is simply doing a little "advance work" here in this situation. He *has* to go through Samaria because he is committed to going out of his way to reach broken, hurting, lost people. He *had* to be at Jacob's well -- for this woman.

Come to think of it, God had the jump on Jesus in this regard. God has long been in the habit of going out of His way to reach broken, sinful, even grumbling and complaining people. He did so once at a place called Rephidim.

He did it again at a place called Sychar.

He has done it at that place that every one of us calls “home.” How do I know? Listen to the apostle Paul: “But God showed his love for us by sending Christ to die for us *while we were still sinners*” (Rom. 5:8). Perhaps this is the original definition of what it means to “go the extra mile.”

As we come to the Table this morning, come with joy and gratitude for the privilege of walking with Jesus through this Lenten season. For Jesus has gone out of his way to walk with *us*.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.