

Sermon – “God Speaks With Those People?”
Sunday, March 19, 2017
Scripture Readings: Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42
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Today’s first reading tells of an episode from the Israelite people’s journey after escaping slavery in Egypt. Note that the “wilderness of Sin” mentioned here is an untranslated proper name for a place, not a reference to sinfulness. Hear these words from Exodus 17, 1 through 7.

¹ 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?”

Our Gospel reading tells us of a surprising cross-cultural encounter. The Jews and Samaritans at that time were insistently separate groups, who refused to have contact with one another and both claimed to be descended from the true tradition of Israel. Listen for God’s word to you in John 4, verses 5 through 42.

⁵ ...[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 [God] 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.”

Jesus’s encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well catches everyone around him off-guard. She is taken aback that he, a Jew and a man, would engage with her in this way. His own disciples share her astonishment. And then both she and her whole city are amazed at the word he, a Jew, brings—a word of salvation to them, Samaritans, from God.

This situation, the Messiah, or anointed one of God, bringing prophetic and saving words well outside the bounds people expect God to cross, brings to my mind a public campaign our brothers and sisters over in the United Church of Christ have had going for several years under the banner, “God is Still Speaking.”

“God is Still Speaking,” is a slogan meant to remind us that God is actively at work in the world, not finished with telling truth, not done with turning the hearts of people. It is meant too as a declaration that no narrow group of people has a total grasp on what God’s work is or the final word on all that God intends for the human race. It is a reminder to keep our ears open for things we have not heard before—an important reminder, since surely we cannot claim to have it all right already.

It is an appealing reminder, for we know we live in a world that still clearly needs to hear. This is a world gone awry in vast and significant ways, which needs the voice of God still speaking into it; and we can pray with all our hearts that God has not simply stopped by our planet on a quick visit, dropped off a thick book containing all God intended to say to us, and then left us to scour its pages with nothing but our own interpretive wisdom for the remainder of the ages to come.

Now, that slogan, “God is Still Speaking,” is, to be sure, appealing for somewhat less good reasons, as well. It can be spoken as if meant mainly to counter any people who hold fast to things they think God has already said. It also subconsciously offers us the temptation to decide the voice of God can be found in any current trend or idea we find personally attractive at this moment. There is danger down that road, but we’re not going to deal with that today except to note it as a caution along the way.

For our story today is, in fact, of God speaking in a place and time where it was unexpected, in a way that was unexpected, to unexpected people, and we should consider what that means for us. Jesus pays no attention, except in a matter-of-fact way, to the boundaries his own ethnic and religious culture has built. A woman? Not only spoken to as a worthy person, she becomes a message-bearer, an excited, true evangelist, while all those disciples who love to argue about how important they are stand around, confused. Samaritans? When Jesus says, “look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting,”¹ he is standing at that very moment in Samaria, a place any of his own people would have regarded as outside God’s story of salvation.

Where do we see ourselves in this story? I bet we don’t, really. We might identify in some way with those present, but this is one of those narratives where, I strongly suspect, we tend to automatically see ourselves not as the woman, not as Jesus nor any other character mentioned there, but instead as some kind of already-enlightened observers, standing to the side, watching it unfold, and nodding our heads at how the inclusiveness of the message warms our hearts.

But is that really who we are? The open-minded bystander, fully woke and fully prepared for God to cross human boundaries? There is no such character in this story at all! Maybe, just like most everyone else, we are really the disciples, or the woman, or the people from her town; astonished, confused, and requiring Jesus to do some direct work with us before we’re capable of accepting or understanding what’s going on.

In other words, whatever we assume about ourselves, are *we* really willing to hear God speaking anew in and through the people we look down on or whom we look at across a wide gulf? Or are we pretty sure it is some *other* people who need to wake up and become willing to hear God speaking in people not like *themselves*? We probably don’t even think of ourselves as *having* “other people” whom we exclude. It’s a broad brush, but denominationally we’re on board with inclusivism and sometimes so proud of ourselves for it that we don’t always notice when we hold up the *concept* of including all of God’s people without really being prepared to hold up all of those people themselves, or to honor the fact that God might be using them, just like God used this Samaritan woman, to share truth, love, and gospel.

¹ John 4:35b (*New Revised Standard Version*).

“You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews,” Jesus said to the woman.² One sentence, with massive import. It is a matter-of-fact acknowledgment of their religious difference as real and substantive—the Jews are, according to Jesus, a repository of some particular kind of knowledge of God that the Samaritans do not have.

And then, because Jesus’s own people, the Jews, have got that knowledge of God, “salvation is for the Jews,” right? No! He says “salvation is *from* the Jews.”³ He is suggesting that it is *for* this outsider woman, too; that it is not constrained to his people but is for the other nations as well.

And then? He offers *her* a unique piece of the truth even his own disciples don’t really comprehend. The Messiah...“I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”⁴ She, the woman, the ignorant Samaritan, runs back to the city and proclaims the truth which God spoke to her, the woman, the Samaritan.

The social and religious boundary that frames this story? To everyone but Jesus, that was that. “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know;” end of story. We know; you do not. We’re in; you’re out. We “get it.” You do not. Nothing further to say, they would think.

And do we not do the same, *even in our own household, that is, within the body of Christ?* The Pentecostals run around speaking in tongues and talking about faith healing. We mostly pretend they don’t exist. The Roman Catholics ask dead saints to pray for them and use medieval-sounding language to justify stances we don’t know how to connect at all with the modern world. The born-again evangelicals are out there talking in overly literal language about the Bible and making us cringe with what to our ears is simplistic-sounding theology. Do we not catch ourselves looking down on others, across a wide gulf?

And yet while we mainline Protestants talk in our careful, educated language about things like God’s preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, those same evangelicals are massively exceeding us in putting real, organized aid in the hands of refugees around the world fleeing the evils of war and oppression. “God is still speaking,” indeed, telling again and again of God’s love for the oppressed, the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan whom God has been speaking for since the early pages of the Bible. Are we willing to acknowledge God’s voice in today’s world as real when we hear it spoken and see it demonstrated by people who make us uncomfortable by how they understand or practice faith?

“*Our* ancestors worshiped on *this* mountain, but *you* say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”⁵ Are we willing to believe that “the hour is coming” when we will worship the Father neither here *nor* there?⁶ Are we willing to believe God doesn’t speak only to those who look or talk or think like us? Are we willing to believe God does not even speak only to those whose religious doctrine is wise, fully informed, and correct, and that in fact many things have been “hidden...from the wise and the intelligent” and “revealed...to infants”?⁷

² John 4:22 (NRSV).

³ See again John 4:22.

⁴ See John 4:25-26 (NRSV).

⁵ John 4:20 (NRSV, emphasis mine).

⁶ See John 4:21.

⁷ Text found in both Matthew 10:25 and Luke 11:21 (NRSV).

We, by which I mean probably just about everybody, love to find a few particular sets of people toward whom we are open, then use our open attitude toward them to think of ourselves as *universally* open and accepting, and fail to see the barriers that still remain in our conceptions regarding whom we think God might ever say a word to.

Who are your “others”, and which are the divides you have trouble seeing God going across? Let us always be praying that we be able to receive anything which is truly of God, no matter where it happens.

Our Lord is the shepherd who goes and searches far and wide, outside the pasture, for the lost sheep, and all the divides between us are laughable compared to the gulf our Lord already has crossed in coming to any of us. “What are human beings that you are mindful of them?” the Psalmist writes, “mortals that you care for them?”⁸ If God is willing to come down in human form to speak to us, then who are we to draw lines on the other side of which God’s voice cannot possibly ever be heard? Not all things which are said are of God. But any person on this planet might well have a word from God that you and I have not heard. May God grant us the discernment, the humility, and the open ears to hear. Amen.

⁸ Psalm 8:4 (NRSV).