

**“Is the Lord among us or not?”** 3 Lent, Year A – by Tim Hall

*Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42*

A cake decorator was asked by a bride to inscribe the words from I John 4:18 on a wedding cake. It reads, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." The decorator didn't know the Bible very well. Instead of putting the words from I John 4:18 on the cake, the decorator wrote the words from the Gospel of John 4:18, The bride and groom anxiously awaited the cake as it was brought forth at their wedding reception for the ceremonial first cutting when they saw, to their surprise, that the inscription now read: "You have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband."

But before we dive into today's Gospel reading, let's backup and look at our Old Testament reading...

“Is the Lord among us or not?” That's the age-old question the Hebrews ask in today's reading from Exodus. Here they are again complaining to Moses, God's prophet who freed them from Egyptian slavery, quarreling with he who earlier parted the mighty waters of the Red Sea at the Straits of Tiran during their flight from Pharaoh. Here they are again testing God, who has already provided food in the wilderness, manna from Heaven every morning and quails in the evening. Yet they continue to grumble, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Isn't that how we feel sometimes? When we see the terrible suffering in the world. Famine, killing disease, torture, wars that never seem to end. When someone dear to us falls into grave illness. When our friends and loved ones die inexplicably. Or take their own lives. “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Moses, in fear for his very life at the anger stirred up among the thirsty Hebrews, cries out to the Lord for help and the Lord answers him yet again. It's almost too obvious. Like Glenda, the Good Witch of the North, to Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz...smiling... “you've always had the ability to return home, you just needed to learn it for yourself.” And here God, the Creator of the Universe, to Moses... reminding... “take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile (*remember the 10 plagues?*), strike the rock, and water will come out of it.” It's just that simple for him, as long as he truly trusts God. It's just that simple for us, as long as we truly believe that yes, the Lord is indeed among us.

A number of years ago I chaperoned a Boy Scout high adventure to the Philmont Scout Ranch in the Rocky Mountain wilderness of New Mexico. We spent 8 days on the trail, hiking from one encampment to the next, and water was critical for our trek. We would pump water from small pools in clear running streams, loading up in the morning for our day ahead and refilling whenever an opportune stream crossing occurred. In the evenings we would often refill our water bottles gathered around a spring where we would share and relive our adventures of the day and talk about what tomorrow held in store for us. Water and life go hand-in-hand.

And here in the southern Sinai wilderness, at their encampment at Rephidim months or years into their journey, God provides for his people Israel with water from a rock, an oasis in the desert. Moses names the oasis Massah (which means “test” because the people tested God) and Meribah (which means “quarrel” because the people quarreled with Moses) to remind us through the millennia that even in our trials and our anger, God is with us.

As a side note, as pretty as the word Meribah sounds as a girl's name, I wouldn't recommend it... given its Hebrew meaning. Although in Turkish, the exact same word means “Hello”!

As we so often do, let's fast forward to our Gospel story. Jesus, early in his ministry, has already been baptized by his cousin John and performed his first miracle at the wedding at Cana, a small village 8 miles outside of Nazareth. Now he is traveling back to Galilee from Jerusalem, where he's been for the Passover. Interestingly enough, John's Gospel tells us that already turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple... placing this scene in Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem, not his last as it is in Matthew and Mark. At any rate, his trek to Galilee takes him through Samaria where he meets the woman at the well. And here, I pause for a little geography and history lesson.

Samaria lies between Jerusalem in the southern Kingdom and Galilee in the North. It's about a 4-5 day walk to get from one to the other, with three different travel routes in ancient times. The western route followed the Mediterranean coast until Caesarea and then cut northeast through Nazareth and into Galilee. The eastern route descends to the Jordan River and follows it northward all the way from the Dead Sea in the south to Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The most direct route follows the mountain ridges north skirting Ephraim and passing through Neopolis and Synchar, the heart of Samaria. In today's cultural geography, Samaria is the northern half of the West Bank.

I thought this was interesting... I had always thought of Samaria as some far flung place, but there it is... right in the midst of the Holy Land. How did it come to be? Ancestrally, Samaritans claim direct descent from Jacob from the tribe of Ephraim and tribe of Manasseh (two sons of Joseph) as well as from the Levites, descendants of Levi, the third son of Jacob.

The Samaritans are adherents of Samaritanism, a religion closely related to Judaism. Samaritans believe that their worship, which is based on the Samaritan Pentateuch, is the true religion of the ancient Israelites from before the Babylonian captivity, preserved by those who remained in the Land of Israel, as opposed to Judaism, which they see as a related but altered and amended religion, brought back by those returning from the Babylonian Captivity.

According to Samaritan tradition, the split between them and the Judean-led Southern Israelites began during the time of the priest Eli when the Southern Israelites split off from the central Israelite tradition. The Samaritans believe that Mount Gerizim was the original Holy Place of Israel from the time that Joshua conquered Canaan (Israel). The major issue between Jews and Samaritans has always been the location of the Chosen Place to worship God; Mount Zion in Jerusalem according to the Jewish faith or Mount Gerizim according to the Samaritan faith.

This verse which the decorator mistakenly put on this wedding cake plays an important role in our gospel passage. You can well imagine that a woman who had been married five times would not have been held in high esteem by the other women in her small village. Who knows, perhaps she seduced one or two of her husbands away from other women in the village. Even if this is not so, the fact that she is shunned by society is evident for a couple of reasons. First of all, John tells us that the hour was about noon. It was considered a woman's task to draw the water for the household and most women would do so at dawn or soon thereafter before the heat of the day set in. Obviously, this Samaritan woman did not feel comfortable mingling with the other women of the village around the well, so she went at a time when almost assuredly no one else would be there. Even more revealing is the fact that Jacob's well is more than a half a mile from the village of Sychar where this woman was from and there almost certainly must have been a well closer to the village.

Wells hold an important place in our human connectedness. I remember growing up, my grandparent's summer place in the Green Mountains of New Hampshire used a well just a few steps outside the dining room as the primary source of drinking and cooking water. Other water, for feeding the plants and gardens, came from rain barrels that collected roof runoff. As a child, it was always a fun and social occasion to be allowed to draw water from the well dug by settlers in the late 1700s. 20 to 30 feet below the well housing, the surface of the water appeared as a distant mirror, reflecting our images until we dropped the bucket attached to the rope into the water. Hoisting the water was a learned skill, passed down from generation to generation. First you had to jiggle the bucket so that it would break through the surface and sink. Then the rope would be wound around a big wooden spool attached to a wooden crank... so heavy after the bucket was filled! And don't let go of the crank or it would spin wildly backwards with a chance of giving you a good whack before the bucket reached the water again. And then transferring the water from the well bucket to the drinking bucket had to be done most carefully. Don't spill. And don't drop the bucket into the well when you have the rope off of it!

In Liberia, at St. Peter's church where we helped build a school, the well was on the church grounds a good distance from the sanctuary. The children of the church had the job of going together on Sunday mornings to draw water for the restrooms, something they did together. And the people of the surrounding village of Caldwell relied on this well for their water, as well, convening there to fetch water and socialize.

But this woman of Sychar avoided contact with other women not only by going to the well at a different time of the day from the others, but even to a more remote well to draw her water. Thus, the depth of her ostracism from her society becomes all the more evident.

What also makes this conversation between a Samaritan woman and Jesus all the more amazing is that Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman at all. The animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans went back over 400 years from the time of our Lord. And even more revealing is the fact that a Jewish rabbi would never talk to any woman, let alone to a Samaritan one. So here is this conversation between Jesus and a woman who had the proverbial three strikes against her: she was a Samaritan, a woman, and not just any woman, but a woman with a bad reputation.

But there is another indication of our Lord's caring for this anonymous woman. When she asks him about Jerusalem being the only place where Jews worship God, Jesus replies, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." The word "woman" is significant here. John uses the Greek word "gunai" which is a term of great endearment. One commentator says it is the equivalent of saying "special lady". Think of it: this woman is a village outcast who cannot associate with the other women, has been divorced several times, and is now living with a man who is not her husband. Yet Jesus, seeing the possibilities in her, calls her "special lady"! He used the same word for this woman that he used to address his mother at the wedding in Cana and on the cross. Amazing. A woman, a Samaritan, a sinner, and yet Jesus calls her a special lady and offers her the water of life.

And there is one final indication of our Lord's love for this woman: she is the first person in the New Testament to whom he reveals his true identity as the Messiah when he tells her "I am he, the one who is speaking to you".

So here was a Samaritan woman, an outcast not only of the Jews but even of her own community, in whom our Lord confides his innermost secret. This encounter with Jesus changed her life, for immediately she went and, overcoming her own fear and lack of standing in the community brought many in her village to believe in him. Legend has it that she became a convert to the Christian faith and took the name "Photini", which means "enlightened one" at her baptism. She became a significant figure in the Jesus community and contributed to the spread of Christianity.

It was our Lord's belief in her innate goodness that changed her life. It was the love of Christ which changed a Samaritan woman with a checkered past into a future saint of the church, just as it changed the Pharisee Saul into St. Paul the Apostle. My question to you today is this: are you an agent of transformation in the lives of others, or do you go around undermining, backbiting, gossiping and otherwise putting other people down... quarrelling and testing. We are challenged on a daily basis in our homes, in our work places and in our encounters with others throughout our daily lives to see them as Christ sees them: as men and women who are not perfect but in whom God has limitless love. Sometimes, we even need to see that in ourselves.

The Lord is indeed among us. It is the Lord that gives us the strength to carry on in the face of so much adversity and loss. It is the Lord we can turn to for comfort when all seems hopeless. And the Lord will lift us up and care for us, make his face to shine upon us and give us peace. The Lord has us covered.

Amen

## References:

Blue text from Agents of Transformation by Sil Galvan, 2017 found at:

<http://www.deaconsil.com/content/page/10139.html>

## Other Notes:

Jesus was thought to have been baptized at Bethbara, on the east bank of the Jordan River. There is some discrepancy as to its exact location, with some sources siting it east of Jericho, just north of the Dead Sea and not too far outside of Jerusalem (~15 miles). Other sources place it southeast of Nazareth, 15 miles south of the Sea of Galilee. The distance between Jerusalem and Galilee is about 80 miles, or an energetic 4-day walk.

Cana is NW of Nazareth about 8 miles. From there, it's another 32 miles to Capernaum.

A rabbi, a priest, and a preacher walk into a bar. The bartender looks up and says "Is this some sort of joke?"

What is the difference between a Baptist and a Episcopalian? The Episcopalian will say "Hi" in the liquor store.

The following map is from:

[http://www.spendayearwithjesus.com/djp/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/SpendaYearwithJesus\\_3routes.jpg](http://www.spendayearwithjesus.com/djp/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/SpendaYearwithJesus_3routes.jpg)

