

# GOD AMONG US

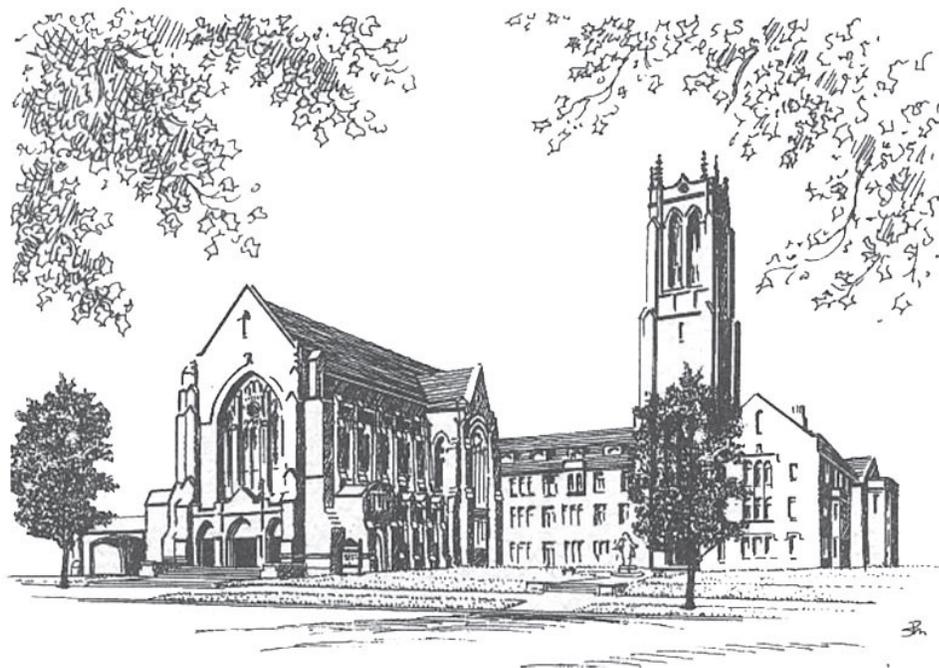
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

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*Third Sunday of Lent*

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



## ST. PAUL'S

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

## **Exodus 17:1-7**

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.

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?"

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?"

So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

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. 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. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

## **Psalm 95**

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

For forty years I loathed that generation and said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways.”

Therefore in my anger I swore, “They shall not enter my rest.”

### **Romans 5:1-11**

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 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. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 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. 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

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

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.)

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."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 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."

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."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

The woman answered him, "I have no husband."

Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

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.”

Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

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?”

Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.”

But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”

So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”

Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 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. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”

So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word.

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.”

In a study of travel agencies, tourism industry workers, and others who sought to understand where people are going these days, they found many things. One of them of interest to me was this: Two-thirds of all global travel was for sacred pilgrimage. People spent their vacations, their money, their energy, their lives journeying toward places of meaning and significance for their faith or whatever vague notion of faith they have.

It illustrates a truth about human beings. We journey to places hoping for transformation. It illuminates for me a truth about this Gospel story. The Samaritan woman was on a journey looking for more than water to drink.

Other streams were closer to her, but she chose to go to Jacob’s well — a holy site to Jews and Samaritans. She was looking for something deeper, looking for God.

We journey to places — this sanctuary and the people who come here.

In a church I served in East Texas, I was visited a few times a year by a man named James Madison. James did not live there but traveled through frequently because it was on his way toward family.

He was kind of a wanderer. I’m not sure what his whole life story was, but he never came asking for much of anything, sometimes a little gas money, sometimes nothing at all. I’m not sure why this older African-American gentleman noticed our church and chose to come in this one. Others were between him and us.

He always had a presenting reason — a drink of water if you will. But as time went on I learned his secret. He could not read. So without much fanfare we would work through his mail.

He saw the church as a safe place, a sanctuary, a place of life for him and thanks be to God.

You all have come here for all kinds of presenting reasons — the beautiful music, the need for community, Biblical stories, somebody made you come. And those can all be good, but most of us have stuff underneath the surface that are longings of the heart — loss, joy, grief, emotions underneath the surface motive.

We all have presenting needs or agendas — water, conversation, help with the mail, a listening ear.

Like James and the Samaritan woman, we go to places where we think we might find that life. We go to a place and among a people hoping that God will meet us and that something transformational might happen.

We go to places where we might find an answer for the longing to be loved, to belong; maybe that's why you are here today.

Toward the beginning of our worship services each week is the Opening Collect, a prayer from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. It was the prayer book of our Methodist founders, John and Charles Wesley.

One of the most meaningful collects in the book is this one that I think of when hearing the story of the Samaritan woman.

*O Lord unto you all hearts are open, all desires are known, and from you, no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit so that we may perfectly love you and magnify your holy name. Through Christ our Lord.*

From you no secrets are hid. The Samaritan woman discovers this truth at the well.

She can't keep her past from Jesus' interest and attention.

"He told me everything I ever did."

Is she afraid, is she relieved?

Who knows?

This Samaritan woman had been in a wilderness of her own. Whether by divorce, death or abandonment, this woman has been through a wilderness. She's experienced lots of pain and loss.

The Samaritan woman is not the only one with secrets. Maybe you have your own.

Secrets enslave the soul.

The woman at the well was thirsty, but other streams were closer to where she lived.

She was thirsty for more than water. She was thirsty for a new life and thirsty for the truth to be revealed. She had held her secrets long enough, and what she discovers at the well is the wellspring of eternal life.

Jesus sees us and sees through us. We move so quickly in life and fill our agendas with activities as an escape from spiritual self-inventory.

Nothing is hidden in the illuminating presence of Jesus. There are no secrets under his watch. He tells the truth and is the truth.

The Samaritan woman's secret was revealed at the well. His word unveils her secrets because we can't encounter the Word of God, the living Christ, and not have our lives be opened up fully.

What we know is that Jesus doesn't command the woman to repent or change her behavior. There is no sinner prayer or altar call from Billy Graham. There is the revelation of the truth of her life.

For this woman, this becomes good news and the heart of her open and honest testimony.

"He told me everything I have ever done."

Finally, someone knew the truth about her other than herself.

I hear the release and relief in her voice.

"He told me everything I have ever done."

This may be scary to some, but revelation is redemptive.

Jesus sees her for who she really is, and there's no judgment. Finally, someone to know me for who I really am and still love me. Jesus tells the truth about our lives so we can see the truth about ourselves.

He moves us in the direction of a transparent Christian faith. He knows everything we have ever done but does not leave nor forsake us nor lord it over us. He loves us in fact and knows what we are really thirsty for.

Jesus demonstrates that, despite knowing our secrets, he offers the living water of love.

Jesus has “seen” her. He has seen her struggles. He has recognized her, spoken with her, offered her a life that is really life. He has *seen* her. She *exists*, has worth, value, significance, and all of this is treatment to which she is unaccustomed.

St. Augustine once said, “Jesus loved everybody he ever met as if that one were the only person in all the world.”

In Exodus 17, the ancient Hebrews were out of bondage in Egypt when they begged Moses to go back. After 430 years and ten generations, some people had grown used to their bondage.

The people complained, grumbled, tested God, and “broke faith” with their God. This abundant life with God didn’t come quickly enough for them.

They faced harsh conditions in the desert. They only did what we would do. When in desperation and frustration, we cling to the very things we were liberated from. We hold on to these things because they represent the known, however harsh, the familiar, however destructive.

In *The Great Divorce* by CS Lewis a man plagued day and night by an awful lizard on his shoulder, the lizard represents lust. But when an angel offers to slay the lizard, he objects.

Lewis then observes: “There is always something we insist on keeping, even at the price of misery. There is always something (we) prefer to joy — that is, to reality... The time comes when, though the pleasure becomes less and less and the craving fiercer and fiercer, and though he knows that joy can never come that way, yet he prefers... to not have it taken from him. He’d fight to the death to keep it. He’d like well to be able to scratch: but even when he can scratch no more, he’d rather itch than not.”

Our divisions, our boundaries, our segregations are comfortable; our sin, our bondage is familiar and therefore preferable. It is safer, even if it is miserable, for us to remain in what is known.

What it ignores is the invitation by Jesus for something more and deeper. We thirst for reconciliation, for a life with God free from pain and division and bondage.

It takes one like Jesus to love us into freedom. It takes Jesus for us to open ourselves to His presence right over our shoulder. Right in the place where we are.

African-American educator Booker T. Washington was fond of telling a story about how a vessel in the South Atlantic Ocean signaled for help from another vessel not far off: “Help! Save us, or we perish for lack of water!”

The captain of the other vessel’s reply was “Cast down your buckets where you are.”

Supposing that the second captain had not gotten the message accurately, the troubled ship signaled yet again. “Help! Save us, or we perish for lack of water!”

Again the nearby ship signaled back, “Cast down your buckets where you are!”

This exchange went on until the first ship, in desperation, decided it had nothing to lose by following this outlandish advice. When crew members cast down their buckets, they drew them up filled with clear, cool, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon. They had not realized that the powerful current of the Amazon River carried fresh water from the South American rain forests many miles out in to the South Atlantic.

Once again, the deepest well is at your disposal if only, if only, you might recognize and see that Jesus is near and that He is the One who knows us best and, remarkably, loves us the most.

The Franciscan Richard Rohr has said, “The people who know God well — mystics, hermits, prayerful people, those who risk everything to find God — always meet (in God) a lover, not a dictator.”

So look over your shoulder on your daily errands, your work, your tasks — Jesus is around as one who loves, tells the truth, sees the truth, has grace.

The Bible is chock full of stories like this, “recognition stories.” Your life is full of them if only you’ll recognize it, we’ll recognize it. Jesus is hanging around offering us grace, forgiveness, life.

Jesus at the well is the answer to the Israelites in wilderness and us, too. God IS among us. Thanks be to God.