

Exodus 17:1-17

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

Sermon preached by the Rev. Deacon Richard Cole

Scottish Church, Geneva

Third Sunday after Lent

March 15, 2020

I bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters in Christ at Emmanuel Episcopal Church, and our Rector, Canon Michael Rusk, who were pleased to release me today so that I could take your service. It's a real joy for me to be here and get to know your congregation a bit better.

I need to say that I am not totally ignorant of your tradition, having been blessed - truly blessed - to have a Scottish godmother. Auntie Nora, as I called her – even though she was not my aunt and her name was not Nora – had a profound and lasting impact on my spiritual upbringing, as good godparents should. She was an elder at her Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati and did great honor to her family name, which was Kindness.

If my godmother had a fault – and it was an endearing one – it was that having come late in life to the joys of driving, she indulged this pleasure with abandon. She was never happier than behind the wheel of her 1970 Dodge. To be Auntie Nora's passenger required great patience. One never quite knew when one would arrive – or indeed where one would arrive. This was because she refused to carry the slightest map in her car – and this before the era of GPS.

Auntie Nora's self-guiding sense of navigation was, in a word, unique. Having asked to be taken to the airport, I was driven to an air force base because, as she put it, "Oh, darlin', I just followed the planes". Then there was the time we were invited to a luncheon party, and when we finally pulled up in front of the darkened house, we were greeted by a very grumpy host and hostess in their pyjamas. On the occasions when we got really lost – like the time we were driving to Kentucky and ended up in Indiana – Auntie Nora would pull over, look at me and say: "Now this isn't where we want to be, but I don't know how we got here."

"This isn't where we want to be, but I don't know how we got here": I think

that pretty well already sums up the year 2020, don't you? And we're only in the month of March. Wherever we look, we see a world that is the polar opposite of what a God who is Love wants for his Creation: refugees fleeing constant bombardment and sleeping on the ground with no humanitarian aid; uncivil political discourse where anyone who disagrees is immediately branded an enemy; authoritarian governments that rule by truth decay, denying and mismanaging climate change, pandemics and gross income inequality; a Europe that is more broken and divided than at any time since the Cold War.

Lent is a time of self-examination, self-denial and penitence, and indeed, there is much in this world for which we need to ask God's forgiveness. As we follow Jesus' road to the Cross and prepare ourselves for the empty tomb, we are called in particular during these 40 days to be honest about our failings, with ourselves and with God. Goodness knows, we spend so much time readjusting the masks that we wear – I mean the virtual ones we use to conceal our true selves, not those to protect us against the coronavirus. But in Lent those masks don't seem to fit anymore. All the deceits that we practice with each other and ourselves look pretty tawdry in the looming shadow of the Cross.

The Samaritan woman in today's Gospel had probably told herself and others so many lies about her shabby personal life that she believed them herself, but clearly, no one in her town harbored any illusions. Whether the woman is genuinely an outcast, or has preferred to exclude herself, she shuns contact with others. It is as if she were wearing not just a face mask, but rather complete body armor. She is, for all intents and purposes, invisible to everybody.

Invisible to everybody, that is, except Jesus. For him, she should be doubly beneath any consideration, not only owing to her gender, but also by the heresy of her beliefs. Samaritans, so called from the region of northern Israel that they still inhabit, do not accept the Jewish Torah. They worship God not in Jerusalem at the Temple, but rather on a mountain near the village of Sychar, where today's Gospel takes place: the modern Nablus, now a city in the Palestinian West Bank.

The status and educational level of women was extremely low in 1st-century Palestine, a condition only compounded by the restrictions placed on them in Judaism. Yet how interesting that so many of Our Lord's life-changing

encounters in the Gospels – life-changing for him, the person involved and for us – involve women: Mary Magdalene, of course; the woman caught in adultery whom Jesus refuses to condemn; the woman whose year-long hemorrhaging is healed when she merely touches his robe; or the Syro-Phoenician woman who literally badgers him to heal his daughter.

The woman in today's story is “a lost soul” in every sense of the term. Coming to Jacob's well, then trudging home with heavy buckets of water in the heat of the day – that's not where she **wants** to be. In the Middle East, where the sun is not your friend, certainly no intelligent or respectable person would even think of drawing water at noon. Her evasive answers to Our Lord show that she no longer understands how she has gotten to her present situation, and even more, how she is ever going to get out of it.

Why should Our Lord care about a woman of ill repute, and a non-Jew at that? You'll notice that the disciples who arrive are astonished to see him even talking to her. Indeed, to speak with her was to acknowledge her very existence as a fellow human being. But Jesus doesn't stop there: he uses his spiritual x-ray vision to home in on the most unlovable parts of her character, not to **shame** her, but to **change** her.

I visited Jacob's Well and Sychar, now known as Nablus, when I was on pilgrimage in Israel and Palestine last July. The water still tastes as refreshingly sweet and cold as it must have to Jesus 2,000 years ago. A beautiful Greek Orthodox church, decorated with modern but stunning icons, has been built above the well. But sadness and deep anger lie over the town. It is a flashpoint of often violent Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation and the surrounding illegal Jewish settlements. The sadness envelops the church as well, site of the brutal murder of one of its priests several years ago by a crazed extremist, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish settler who could not accept a place of Christian worship built over the well associated with his ancestor Jacob.

We despair at the hatred and the evil and the intolerance and the injustice that infect today's world. We remember being warned by moralizing Sunday school teachers: “As you sow, so shall you reap”. In other words, doing bad will bring you bad things in return – a maxim, I dare say, yet to be conclusively proven in this world. But as so often, Jesus turns this completely on its head, saying that no, actually **we** will reap the benefits of what **he** has sown – but only if we change our hearts and do the work needed

to reap them. They will not be delivered to us on a silver platter.

The realization that God already knows the very worst about us, but actually couldn't care less, is a very liberating one. It allows us finally to remove those ill-fitting masks. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done," cries the woman excitedly. For once, she has gotten something exactly right: come and see Jesus. We are invited to do the same. **We** may not know how in the world we ever got so lost, but He most certainly does. Our task – and this is where the painstaking, hard but holy work of Lent begins – is to acknowledge to ourselves and to God that this state of lostness is simply not where we want to be anymore. Unlike the Hebrews, the desert in which **we** often wander about aimlessly is a spiritual one, simply because we refuse to see and to take advantage of the living water that is Jesus.

In our Epistle, Paul comments on the sheer incongruity of an all-knowing, all-loving God who goes to dramatic lengths to find us and reconcile himself with us **before** we even know we are lost – or at least, before we admit to it. This is a God who, in the person of Jesus, threw away everything it means to be God, and took on all our physical and spiritual vulnerability, to the point of dying on a Cross.

By the grace that has come to us through Jesus, we know where we **should** be and we **know** how to get there. Yes, God loves us just as we are, faults and all. But God also loves us **too** much – to let us stay that way. AMEN

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