

**Worship for the Third Sunday in Lent**  
**March 15, 2020**  
**First Presbyterian Church, Hickory NC.**

**Opening Words**

I know to some of us it seems like we are living in a “cancel culture” - when just the idea of a dusting of snow or sub-freezing temperature causes a city-wide shut down. Well, in the past three days this notion of a “cancel culture” has taken on a whole new dimension: in-person university classes... major basketball and golf tournaments... trade conventions and business travel... and now schools statewide... all canceled. In just a matter of a few days, COVID-19 has gone from “wash your hands and cover your cough” to a global economic crisis and significant lifestyle change that very few of us have experienced in our lifetime. Yet, of all the cancellations, perhaps the strangest of all is the decision to cancel religious worship services. It just seems so counterintuitive to cancel worship when people are exceedingly anxious and really need community... when people are facing economic uncertainty and need support... when people are fearful and need the comfort of prayer and connection. And yet- we have had to acknowledge that “large gatherings” such as worship services may promote the spread of disease... and that for all our efforts to forego the passing of the peace and to modify other parts of the service... the best way to protect folks right now (especially our most vulnerable folks) is social distance... to keep apart. It’s sad... and it’s painful... and I tell you it goes against every impulse of church leaders who proclaim faith in a God who is bigger than human fear. But we believe that canceling is at this time the responsible, safe, and compassionate thing to do.

Now, even though we have been immersed in COVID-19 news and information for days now, trusted experts continue to admit that we are in unprecedented territory... that there are still many unknowns... not the least of which is how long this hiatus on meeting together will need to last. For now, our session has said two weeks... but that could change... and we will make sure you know what’s going on as soon as decisions are made.

You may remember that the preacher in the New Testament book of Hebrews implores his people to not neglect their gathering together. He knows that worship and fellowship are essential practices of being the church. So how can we keep “being the Church” in a pandemic? How can we keep “being church” even when we can’t gather together in Sunday school and worship and Bible studies and Wednesday Night Suppers? I suggest FOUR ways.

**FIRST, we can pray for and support our session and staff.** Hard decisions have already been made in the past 48 hours... and there will surely be more to make in the weeks ahead. Please know there was no seminary class called “Congregational Ministry During a Pandemic” – we have no road map for how to do this. So, please trust that the folks who are making decisions are doing it prayerfully, based on the best information we have at the time, and always with the good of the entire congregation in mind.

**SECOND, check on your kinfolk and neighbors.** Your older neighbors who may be afraid to go to the grocery... your neighbor on chemo whose immune system is compromised... your neighbor whose child relies on free school lunch... your neighbor who still has to go to work and could desperately use help with childcare.

Any time you help someone in your proximity, you are living out the values of the Good Samaritan... you are loving both God and your neighbor... you are embodying what this whole gospel thing is about... and you are taking the church out of the building so it can bring life to others. And here's another way we can continue to be church – a way that most of us find very difficult: please ASK for help if you need it... please let us or someone know if you need groceries or medicine or just someone to talk to. Friends, this is what we DO! And it is 'for such a time as this that God has prepared us to be church for each other.

***THIRD, keep in touch with your church family.*** Send notes... make phone calls... email or text or FaceTime... do all the things that we do for our homebound members we now need to do for each other... since very soon we may all be shut-ins, so to speak. We are one body, even when that body is not together in person. Beginning tomorrow our staff and Stephen Ministers will organize intentional ways we can “keep-in-touch” and care for each other during this time. Be on the lookout for ways you can help... and if you know of people who may need special care or if you have ideas, please let us know.

***FOURTH, please send in your pledge or donation.*** This may seem like a small and even petty thing in the grand scheme right now, but trust me, it matters that you continue to get your offering in, as long as you are able. Though the specifics of our work will change a bit, your staff will continue to work... building expenses will need to be paid... and we will continue to meet our mission commitments to the best of our ability. So, please continue your financial support of the church. This would be a great time to sign up for automatic withdrawal or to give online... but if you can't give online, mail in a check, send a carrier pigeon, do whatever you have to do. Even though the building will be mostly empty, the ministry and mission of this church will continue.

**John 4:3-42**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
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### **Introduction**

As you all know, we have two services each Sunday which take place at the same time. What this means is that each week Heather and I consult on the text we will preach, but then write and deliver different sermons. Well, this week started out just like any other week - I was writing my sermon and Heather was writing hers until Friday when we finally decided to cancel our services and livestream. As you might expect, when we talked on Friday we were going in slightly different directions... and this morning we will offer you both of those directions... NOT two full sermons (you'll be glad to know) but two different biblical and theological insights that come from this incredibly important story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman who meet at Jacob's well. This reading records Jesus' longest conversation with anyone in the Gospels. Our reading will be done in three verses – I will read the narrator part, Matt Schrum will be Jesus, and Heather will be the Samaritan woman.

#### **John 4 (selected verses)**

- W: Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard,  
Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John,"  
he left Judea and started back to Galilee.  
But he had to go through Samaria.  
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,
- M: "Give me a drink."
- W: (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)  
The Samaritan woman said to him,
- H: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"
- W: (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)  
Jesus answered her,
- M: "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."
- H: "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?"
- M: "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."
- H: "Sir, give me this water,  
so that I may never be thirsty  
or have to keep coming here to draw water."
- M: "Go, call your husband, and come back."
- H: "I have no husband."
- M: "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!"
- H: "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."

M: "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."

H: "I know that Messiah is coming...  
When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

M: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

W: 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,

H: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!  
He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

W: 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."

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

God of life, shower us in your living water, bringing us to new life, fresh and clean. Walk with us as we share the knowledge of your living water with others, so that all might live. And now may the words of our mouths and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **He HAD to go...**

### **John 4:5-42**

### **Rev. Whit Malone**

In the Gospel of John, there is always more going on than meets the eye – it's one of the things I love about John's gospel, he is really good at creating multiple layers of meaning. An example of this is in verse 4 in our reading this morning... when John says Jesus "HAD to go through Samaria." You may not have even noticed... I'm not sure I ever did... but as I said, there's more going on here than meets the eye.

Because if you look at one of those colored maps in the back of your Bible, you'll see that if Jesus is in Judea as John indicates and he wants to eventually get to Galilee, then he doesn't HAVE TO GO through Samaria. In fact, because of the extreme hostility between Jews and Samaritans, most Jews went out of their way to avoid going anywhere near Samaria. But John says Jesus HAD to go through it. WHY? Just a little backstory: at that time the Jews considered themselves to be the bearers of the true faith of ancient Israel... that they were the true keepers of the right legal and scriptural traditions. But guess what? Samaritans believed THEY were the bearers of the true faith. Though both groups came from the same ancestral line, Jews considered Samaritans to be outside of God's chosen people... and because the Samaritans had intermarried with Gentiles and worshiped at Mount Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem, they were considered "unclean." At one point, the Jews had destroyed the Samaritan temple at Gerizim... which led to the Samaritans tossing bones on the floor of the Jerusalem Temple, defiling it. Suffice it to say there was no love lost between them... so it would have made perfect sense for Jesus to avoid passing through Samaria. But John says that he had to go that way? Why?

Well, the Greek word that John uses is a particularly strong one... it might be translated "constrained" – that Jesus he was "constrained" to go that way... yet this is also one of those words that John uses in a special way. Not only does he mean Jesus' route was "necessary" in a geographical sense... but even more, it was necessary in a theological sense. In other words, Jesus going through Samaria was God's doing... it was part of God's plan... because it was God's will that he go to those who were the object of prejudice and rejection. Jesus HAD to go to those who were cut off... to those heretics... to those foreigners... to those his people believed to be unworthy of God's grace. He HAD to go through Samaria for their sake. After all, it was just a few verses earlier that John writes so very beautifully: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Because God loved the world so much, God's Son had to go through Samaria that day to break open two impenetrable boundaries of Jesus' day: the boundary between the "chosen people" and the "rejected people" ... and the boundary between men and women. It was his Father's will that he would go there and meet a very special woman... a Samaritan woman... that he would look her in the eye and see her as a precious child of God... that he would talk to her and eventually offer her the "gift of God" – living water... to quench her deepest thirst.