

A Story of Hope
A Sermon on Exodus 17, Romans 5, and John 4 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Our story with God is a highly personal story, and it is a story of our transformation, and it is a real-life story about what it is like for us to live in community together. The three scripture readings appointed for today shed light on these three stories: the personal story, the community story, and the story of us being changed by our encounter with God.

From the book of Exodus we see that our story with God is a story of our real life experience. It is a story of us trying to live as a community. I hope you had a little smile on your face as Jim was reading this passage from the book of Exodus. This is a serious story, with a serious lesson, of course. It is also seriously amusing.

Moses has led the people out of Egypt. Pharaoh's army has been decimated in their attempt to cross the Red Sea, while Moses and company came through completely unscathed. Then Moses began to lead the people through the desert. They were running out of food to eat. Through Moses' conversation with God the Hebrew people were given manna to eat, so they had plenty to eat every day.

You might think at this point that the people would have a little bit of gratitude stored up for Moses. He is their leader and he keeps on conjuring first rate miracles as he works to lead them. Not so much. They are running out of water. So the people begin to quarrel and complain to Moses. "Did you bring us all the way out here, just for the purpose of killing us? Or was it merely for the pleasure of watching us grow weaker and weaker by the day?"

Maybe I'm just really into the Bible, but I don't think any of the late night comedians could beat this sort of story line. This would be funny, if it weren't so true. In real life, one of the things we can always count on is that people will quarrel with one another and complain about their leaders.

The serious message is that even as we are experiencing conflicts in our communities, God is journeying beside us. Our journey with God is a real life, community journey. People will always end up fighting with each other and complaining about the poor leadership; yet God does not give up on us.

The story of the Samaritan woman's conversation with Jesus from John chapter four points to the personal quality of our journey with God. God is seeking out each one of us individually, the way Jesus engages with the Samaritan woman.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman illustrates the ways God reaches out to us in the most unexpected circumstances. There were at least four or five reasons why Jesus should not have been talking with this woman. Jesus was absolutely forbidden from asking her for a drink of water, partly because this meant he would be using her bucket or her cup to drink water.

Christians who defend the notion that women are not full, equal members of the body of Christ are demonstrating that they do not understand the deeper meaning of this story. The Samaritan woman's importance is indicated by the fact that her conversation with Jesus was the longest such conversation recorded in any of the Gospels. She was also the first person ever to refer to Jesus as the Messiah and the first person to, in some way, preach the good news to a crowd of people.

The implications of the story are profound for each one of us. If Christ engaged with the Samaritan woman, the most forbidden, most rejected person in his universe, surely God is seeking each one of us. God is seeking out each one of us, regardless of our nationality or personal history. Even though we may feel distant from God, each one of us is precious to God. Though we may not tell the story, each one of us has a story about our journey with God that is highly personal.

Our story with God is also a story of us being changed by our encounters with God. This is the focus of Paul's letter to the Romans. I'm going to be a little bold here and make the claim that Paul's letter to the Romans is the richest, most complex, and most misunderstood book in the New Testament. Many of the core ideas of what it means to be a Christian are expressed in this letter. At the same time, many of the biggest mistakes ever made by Christians have come from people not understanding Paul or his letter to the Romans. That means we have to take it seriously. We have to study Romans, not just read it.

There are three main ideas in Paul's letter to the Romans. First, those who follow Christ are fundamentally changed by the experience. The second, main idea of Romans is that Gentile followers of Christ are not superior to the Jews but are being grafted, like the branch of a tree, onto the family tree of God's people.

These first two ideas are about changes that happen in us, that fall under the broad category we call 'grace'. That means that these are changes that are given to us. We don't earn them; we merely have to receive them.

The third main idea of Romans is about our relationships with one another. As God has accommodated Godself with humankind in the person of Christ Jesus, so also we who follow Christ Jesus must accommodate ourselves to one another.

Let's take a closer look at our passage from Romans to dig a little deeper into these ideas about the ways we are changed by our encounter with God. In verse one Paul writes, *Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. We might trip over this word 'justified'. It will help to substitute the word 'rescued' or the phrase 'made right' for the term 'justified'. So, 'we are rescued, or made right, by faith'.

We are often pretty self-centered, so many people assume that when Paul talks about 'faith' he is talking about something that you or I might possess. But here, as elsewhere in his letters, Paul is talking about God's faith, that is God's relationship of trust with us. So I would read verse one this way: *Since we are made right by God's relationship of trust with us, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*.

We are rescued, or made right, by God's relationship of trust with us, and this brings us peace. (pause) As noted in the next verse, this is not something we have earned but it was given to us as a gift, which we call grace.

For the sake of time let's skip down a few verses. *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*. That's us. We do not receive God's grace through our strength, but in our weakness.

All of these ideas reinforce the main idea of the story of the Samaritan woman. She was rescued by Jesus' act of reaching out to her to establish a relationship of trust. Jesus did not reach out to her because she was the strongest candidate to receive God's grace. She was weak and ungodly in many ways, just like us.

Skipping down a few more verses, Paul writes, *God proves God's love for us in that while we still were making many mistakes, Christ died for us...For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of Christ Jesus, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life*. Let's consider what it looks like for us to be saved, because the idea of salvation is central for Christians and is used in different, conflicting ways.

In the context of Paul's letter to the Romans and in the story of the Samaritan woman, salvation means we are changed by our encounter with God. For Paul, the change in us is very specific. We are changed in a way that is parallel to the way God was changed. As God has accommodated Godself with humankind in the person of Christ Jesus, so also we who follow Christ Jesus have been changed in the fact that we are striving to accommodate ourselves to one another. This is what salvation looks like.

God became a fundamentally different being in taking on flesh and coming into the world in the person of Christ Jesus. So also, we who are saved by our encounter with God will become fundamentally different. Our fundamental difference will be our willingness to accommodate other people. This is what it means to be saved. Being saved doesn't mean winning every battle you fight, or acting superior to others; according to St. Paul, being saved means accommodating others, especially those who are really different from us.

From the book of Exodus we see that God never gives up on us, even as we endure the complaints and conflicts of life in our communities. From the Gospel of John we see that God is seeking each one of us, regardless of the mistakes we have made in our lives. From Paul's letter to the Romans we see that we are rescued by God's faith, by God's reaching out to us in a relationship of trust.

This is a story of hope for all who are wearied by the conflicts of life. This is a story of hope for all who feel trapped in their weakness and in their mistakes. This is a story of hope for all who are willing to be changed by their encounters with God.