

Sermon on John 4:19-26
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Christ is risen, He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

“Where should we go to church, and what should we do when we get there?” Those are not just contemporary questions, but ones as old as the world. In the beginning, the answers were easy. In the Garden of Eden, the LORD set up the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as the location of worship and He even gave them an order of service: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” We all know how that turned out, for that sin involved us all. And notice how the devil’s temptation comes while Adam and Eve were at church. No surprise then that he would attack us at the same point today.

Ever since the plunge into sin, the two questions, “Where should we go to church, and what should we do when we get there?” have been asked and answered in dizzyingly diverse ways, right down to this day, as the history of religions shows, but with one exception the answers have had these flaws in common: the location is chosen by man, and the purpose of gathering is either to placate or butter up the god or gods there worshiped.

The exception has been God’s Chosen People, of the Old and New Testaments. Old first. Before the Exodus, the locations varied, but the mode of worship was faith in the promises and sacrifices, about which we don’t have many details except that the LORD was pleased when they were offered in faith. But after the Exodus, we get our two questions answered in wonderful and remarkable detail. The LORD’s reason for calling the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery was to dwell with the Israelites and institute Divine Service. The LORD says of the Tabernacle, “I will meet with you, to speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by My glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve Me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt *that I might dwell among them*. I am the Lord their God” (Exodus 29:42-46).

Amazing! The Creator, the LORD of heaven and earth, wants to make His dwelling among men. Why on earth would He want to do that? Shouldn’t God be above us, far away from us, not down in the dirt with us smelly, sinful people? The Greeks thought so, but remember what St. Paul said about their wisdom.

Why God chooses this or that will always be a mystery, but that He chooses Israel is not in question, nor is His motivation a mystery. To His Chosen People the LORD says in Deuteronomy: “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on

the face of the earth.⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).

Clearly it’s always been grace alone, from the God who is love, who wants to dwell with sinners and redeem them. And so Israelite worship had a divinely appointed location (Tabernacle and later Temple), and a divinely appointed purpose: not to placate or butter God up, but to receive His blessings and call upon His Name. Of course, Israel abused these privileges and whored themselves out to idols, hence the captivities and destruction of Jerusalem and the temples, and in the midst of all that, the Samaritans came to be, which brings us to our text. The Samaritans are a fascinating study. In fact, there are still a handful today around Shechem. The Samaritans only accepted the Books of Moses, not the Prophets or Psalms, and they modified the Pentateuch to fit their religious preferences: for one thing, they decided the appointed place of worship was not Jerusalem and Mt. Zion, but rather Mt. Gerizim. They even erected a rival temple there, which the Jews destroyed in around 130 BC.

So for this and other reasons there was bad blood between Jews and Samaritans, so much so that St. John tells us that they had nothing to do with each other. And the location of right worship continued to be a major point of dispute between them at the time of Christ. The Samaritan woman knew this. She was astonished that this Jewish man would converse with her, a Samaritan woman, but He offered this adulterous woman living water and in the process showed that the sort of worshipers the LORD was looking for weren’t necessarily Jews and most certainly were sinners.

Now as they stood by Jacob’s well, with Mt. Gerizim in view, she asks Jesus our first question, “Where should we go to church?” From His omniscience about her scandalous past, she perceives that He is some sort of prophet, so she figures that he might be able to settle this worship question. She says, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”

In His response, Jesus seems to come down on the side of the Israelites in this ancient worship war. He is not shy about saying that Samaritan worship is ignorant and worthless, and that Israelite worship was God’s revealed gift. He says, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” But at the same time Jesus makes the astonishing claim that traditional worship was giving way to something new, something contemporary: Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Clearly this shows the age of worshiping according to the Law was coming to the close, yet this answer just raises more questions. Where is the Father located, and how can

I get to Him? If God is spirit, how can we flesh and blood creatures have access to Him? And what in the world does “worship in spirit and truth” mean? It sounds abstract, ethereal, philosophical. Is this an injection of Platonism, Gnosticism into the Gospel?

No way! Fortunately, the story doesn’t end there, but the Samaritan woman yanks us out of idle speculation about the Father and spirit and truth and points us to Jesus: ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.” Whoa! But it’s better in the Greek: ἐγώ εἰμι, ὁ λαλῶν σοι. “I AM, the One speaking to you.”

All of the questions I have raised this morning are answered in Jesus, for the woman was right: “He will tell us all things.” He *has* told us all things. Salvation is from the Jews, from a Jew named Jesus who also is the LORD, the great I AM who preached to Moses from the burning bush. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled!) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth....For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

Later on, Jesus would say, “I AM the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.” And when Philip pressed Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus simply pointed to Himself and said: “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”

The words and works of the Father are seen in the Man Jesus. God is spirit, but now He has a body, flesh and blood, once and for all. And that body is the new location of worship, the New Testament tabernacle and Temple to replace the Old. Remember how, after Jesus purged the Temple, the Jews whom Jesus had driven out wanted evidence that Jesus had the authority to do this, so they asked, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” And then Jesus showed that the Lord would not leave Israel without a Temple. ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”

One of the charges leveled against Jesus at His trial was that He wanted to destroy the Temple in Jerusalem. They took His statement recorded in John’s Gospel out of context and used it to convince Caiaphas and the Jewish Council to convict Him. Later, on the cross, people mocked Jesus, saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

But Jesus knew that the temple of His body had to be destroyed and forsaken for our sake. The Old Testament worship was God's good gift, and served its purpose, but above all, it pointed forward to the once and for all sacrifice of Christ. Countless animal sacrifices had been offered up at the Tabernacle and Temple according to God's Law, but now Jesus' body and blood had to be offered up to God as the once and for all sacrifice for our sin. He cried out, "It is finished!" and John the Baptist's proclamation came to pass: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." When Jesus gave up His Spirit and died, the curtain in the holy of holies was torn in two from top to bottom, showing that the final sacrifice had been made and our reconciliation with God was complete.

But that still doesn't answer the question of how and where we are to worship the Father in spirit and in truth. John's Gospel does give us an answer, and there is nothing abstract or ethereal about it. "One of the soldiers pierced [Jesus'] side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth – that you also may believe" (John 19:34-35). Later on, St. John explained the significance of this event when he wrote, "This is he who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree" (1 John 5:6-8).

This is how the Father is worshiped in spirit and in truth: when we receive the Holy Spirit inspired apostolic testimony by faith and are given life by the Spirit and the water and the blood that come from Jesus. The water and blood that poured forth from the side of Jesus testified that His death for our sins had been completed, and by that water and blood the Spirit testifies also still today that His death has worked complete forgiveness and salvation for each of His worshipers, that is, believers. The water that poured from His side is now carried by the Spirit to you in Holy Baptism to wash you clean of all sins and give you new birth into the Church and give you the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who dwells in you now draws you to hear Christ's Word in the Divine Service and come to the altar where the blood that poured from Christ's side now fills the chalice in Holy Communion and gives you the life-giving food and drink of Christ's true body and blood.

Worship in spirit and in truth is worship in the Name and presence of Jesus, the Word made flesh. "Where two or three have been gathered together in My Name, there am I among you." Not just the Spirit of Jesus or merely His divinity, but the whole Jesus, Immanuel, God-with-us, here for His Bride, the Church. And not just with us only to be worshiped, especially not with us to be placated or buttered up, but best of all, what He said at the Last Supper holds true for us today: "I am among you as the One who serves." "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for the masses." Even to His body given and blood shed, for you, for the forgiveness of sins.

So where we go to church, and what we do when we get there, both flow out of our recognition of the Crucified and Risen One who lives and dwells among us to teach us all

things necessary for life and salvation, who comes to serve us, and we respond accordingly. We worship where His Gospel is proclaimed in truth and purity and His Sacraments are given out according to His mandate and institution. We sing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and we rejoice in the LORD's wonderful gifts in the liturgy.

But fundamentally, worship in spirit and in truth is faith and confession, as we see in John's Gospel. It's striking that worship is not a frequently recurring theme in John's Gospel (perhaps he was waiting to say his piece in Revelation). *Proskuneo* and its cognates occur ten times in this pericope but only twice elsewhere in John's Gospel and nowhere in his Epistles. After this lesson, the next time the word "worship" appears, it is at the climax of the story of the man born blind: the Jews had cast the man out of the synagogue, and Jesus hunted the man down and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you."³⁸ He said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

Trust in Christ, confession of faith in Christ, and kneeling with heart and perhaps even knees before the Temple of His Body. That's worship in spirit and in truth. Amen.