

I'm going to do a Cliff Notes or Readers Digest Condensed version of the sermon I had planned for today, because I also need to talk about what's happening the next 2 weeks when we offer online services only.

I'll talk briefly about our Gospel lesson from the 4th chapter of John, Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well in a few minutes.

But first I want to mention what's been happening in our Parish Reading Project section of John for this week.

Last week I said that one of the unique things about John's Gospel is the number of times that Jesus goes to Jerusalem. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the adult Jesus only visits Jerusalem during the last week of his life, during Holy Week. But in John, Jesus makes numerous trips to Jerusalem. In fact, out of the 878 verses in John, Jesus is in Jerusalem in 565 verses, 64% of the Gospel.

And not only is Jesus frequently in Jerusalem. He's also there for Jewish holidays. In the longer form of the sermon I would have gone into more detail about those holidays and those visits.

But for now, why Jerusalem? And why all of these Jewish holy days? Why are these important to John?

First off, Jerusalem is the spiritual capital of Judaism. And the Temple is the absolute epicenter of Judaism. And yes, Jesus is Jewish. And yes, his 12 apostles are Jewish, as are other followers in John: Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

But Jesus also receives a lot of opposition and push-back from the majority of the Jewish leaders. Much of the middle part of John will feature these leaders disputing with Jesus: chapters 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10.

Back in the prologue in chapter 1, John foreshadowed this. He says about Jesus: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."¹

Which brings me to an important disclaimer. The Gospel of John has been misused during its history. John refers to the leaders of the Jewish opposition to Jesus with the blanket term, "The Jews." And sadly in Western History, many Christians have used this blanket statement as an excuse for anti-Semitism and persecution of all Jewish people. But when John uses that term, "The Jews," John is almost always referring to the Jewish leaders who are opposing Jesus.

¹ John 1:11-12

After all, two members of the Jewish council are singled out as being eventual followers of Jesus: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. And Jesus and his disciples are certainly all Jewish. So when John says the Jews, we should think, "Jewish leaders," not all Jews in Jesus' day, and CERTAINLY not all Jewish people in the world today.

But, having said all that, Jesus is certainly wanting to take Judaism to a new level in following God. John is very clear about that. I'll say more about that next week in my very first online sermon.

So in John, Jesus is often in Jerusalem, the Jewish Holy City. And Jesus is there on the holiest days on the Jewish calendar. And through his actions, and through his teaching, he is attempting to take Judaism to a higher level. He is calling the Jewish people to follow God in deeper ways.

But that message will not just be for the Jewish people. And the first glimpse of that comes in John chapter 4, in our Gospel lesson today.

Remember, in last week's Gospel lesson from chapter 3, we saw Jesus meet Nicodemus by night. Nicodemus is a powerful Jewish leader, a Rabbi, a Pharisee, part of ruling Jewish council. And Jesus has a long conversation with him about learning to follow God and believe in God in new ways.

But in chapter 4, we see Jesus meeting with someone who is the complete opposite of Nicodemus on just about every scale in Jesus' culture.

Jesus meets a Samaritan woman. And she is the polar opposite of Nicodemus.

First off, she comes to the well at noon. That says something important. Nobody draws water at noon. And nobody draws water alone.

We find out later that this woman has a questionable history. She has had 5 husbands, and the 6th guy she's shackled up with now won't give her a ring. So it's probable that this woman comes alone to the well at noon in order to avoid the other women. Other women who look down on her, who talk about her, behind her back and to her face.

The contrast between this woman in ch4 and Nicodemus in ch3 couldn't be sharper. A rich Jewish male, an important teacher, a pillar of his community, versus a poor Samaritan female, a woman with a bad reputation, an outcast in her community.

Plus, in that culture, men did not interact publicly with women who were not their wives. On top of that, Jews didn't have anything to do with Samaritans. Good Jews wouldn't even eat off the same plate or drink from the same cup a Samaritan had used.

But while the Samaritan woman is at the well, Jesus asks HER for a drink.

They have a long conversation. I don't have time for all the ins and outs of it. They talk about religion, about God, and about differences between Samaritans and Jews. But as Jesus is talking to her, eventually he reveals something remarkable.

She refers to the coming of the Christ, the Messiah. And Jesus says, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."²

That means that the Samaritan woman is the first person in John's Gospel to receive this information. And amazingly, this Samaritan woman makes an incredible response. She goes back to her people and tells them that she believes she has found the Christ, and she brings them to meet Jesus.

And Jesus stays in their village and teaches them for 2 days. And at the end, they agree with her. In the end, they say, "We know that this is truly the Savior of the world."³

The Samaritan woman and the people of her village go further than Nicodemus. Nicodemus becomes a follower eventually. These Samaritans become followers almost immediately.

Plus, the Samaritan woman is the first person in John's Gospel to profess faith in Jesus. There will be others later in John who will profess faith at even deeper levels. But she is the first one. And she brings her people to acknowledge Jesus as their savior, and the savior of the world.

What can we do during these times to acknowledge and proclaim that Jesus is the Savior of the world?

We're in a tough and unprecedented time in our country and our world right now. The global pandemic has people scared and doing irrational things like hoarding toilet paper. Toilet paper will not stop a virus. But it is something concrete people can do. And they seem to be doing it.

We are in an unprecedented shut-down of many Episcopal Churches across the country this weekend. And next weekend it will extend to Episcopal Churches in Northwest Texas, through the end of March, and then we'll see after that.

That means that for the next two Sundays, at least, we will not be gathering together for worship in this room. But we will still be offering worship in this room and inviting you to gather online.

This will be different for all of us. The plan is that 3 or 4 of us will be here and stream the service for the rest of the St. Paul's family.

² John 4:26

³ John 4:42

We'll be sending out logistical details later this week on how exactly to log-in next Sunday morning at 10:25 a.m., and how to download a bulletin. Please plan to be part of this service next week and the week after.

This is tough. It's especially tough for Episcopalians.

Because one of the key places we see and encounter Jesus is in the sacrament of this altar. And for the next 2 weeks we have to face the reality of not being able to gather for worship in person, but rather do it virtually by streaming the service on-line and participating through computers or smart phones. But I hope that we will still be able to sense and see Jesus in our midst at this altar, even though all of us will not be able to partake physically. I believe we can find Jesus spiritually in such circumstances. That's going to be a test we are facing.

Also, I and other Episcopal priests across the country have been grappling with the question about which service to offer online. Some churches are doing morning prayer. And others are doing Eucharist.

And I'm of the Eucharist school of thought. 1. It's more familiar. We haven't been regularly doing Morning Prayer at St. Paul's in 35 or 40 years. Communion is the service we're familiar with, and this is what I plan to do.

This may seem absurd since most of you will not be able to physically receive communion. But what you can do is make a spiritual communion.

Spiritual communion is not something we often talk about. But it is an ancient practice of the church when people are in extreme circumstances and can't be present at a communion service.

For years in the small version of the Book of Common Prayer that we put out for US Military personnel, there are instructions about making spiritual communion if you're cut off from participating in physical communion. Historically, this practice has also been used by travelers, and people who are being held captive, and by the sick who are unable to get to church.

In the Episcopal Church, we affirm that you can receive the full benefits of communion in either the bread or the wine.

But, if dire circumstances prevent you from making it to church, we believe you can still receive the full spiritual benefits of Holy Communion by practicing spiritual communion.

So next week, in the midst of dire circumstances, we will be celebrating communion here. And I hope that you will gather online and participate with us. And I will physically break the bread here at this table. And on your behalf, I will receive the physical elements of communion. But all of us who want to receive the spiritual benefits of communion will receive them.

So yes, I believe we can be able to sense and see Jesus in our midst at the altar, even though we will not be able to partake physically. I do believe we can find him spiritually in such circumstances. And I hope you'll make plans to participate.

Also, one of the other places we see and encounter Jesus is in his body, the church, our fellow Christians. If we have to increasingly engage in social distancing, and hunkering down, will we still be able to experience Christ in each other? We won't have the luxury soon of being able to gather in the same room at the same time. But modern technology does give us tools to do it virtually.

I'm asking a number of members of St. Paul's do divide up our directory between them and check base with each of members a couple of times a week during this crisis. It may be by phone, or email, or video chat. But I believe this is important.

Social distancing and hunkering down can lead to isolation. We could choose to hide in our little bunkers out of fear and close ourselves off from the Body of Christ around us. I'm hoping that we won't. I'm hoping that we will still be a caring community for each other even if we can't be in physical contact with each other.

Can we see Christ in the sacrament even if we can't receive it?
Can we see Christ in each other even if we can't gather together?

I believe we can, trusting in God's love, trusting in God's goodness, even in the midst of difficult and trying times.

Trust God. Seek his presence even in unusual circumstances.

Love God. Love your neighbor.

And don't forget to wash your hands!