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3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Year A  
University Presbyterian Church  
Tuscaloosa, AL  
24 February 2008

**Subject:** Stages  
**Main idea:** The stories of a person's or people's faith develop in stages, and there is value re-visiting them along the way.

*Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## **ROCKS, SAMARITANS AND CALVIN'S GENEVA**

**EXODUS 17:1-7; JOHN 4:5-26**

Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. In John Calvin's Geneva, every worship service began with this refrain from a Psalm. Whose help? Our help---not your help or my help or any particular special interest group's help---but our help: All humanity's help is in the name of the Lord who created—and recreates---heaven and earth, stones and Samaritans, Jews and Muslims, agnostics and evangelicals, even Presbyterians (who are part Jewish, part Muslim, sometimes agnostic and often evangelical).

Calvin, often remembered as a serious-minded Reformer, is frequently reduced to an adjective describing a hard-nosed work ethic or austere décor. One who is labeled a Calvinist, in our culture, is greeted with suspicion, a five-point Calvinist with even more (and that's probably deserved). More problematic than Calvinist—an adjective---is Calvinism, a noun that points to an ideology which ignores that faith is practiced by human beings. By suggesting that human beings are incidental to all twists in a given plot, Calvinism offends notions of self-reliance. It is difficult to accept that God's grace is not merely another achievement to pursue, but that is, in fact, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All I---and I suspect, we---ask is that tradition not define faith too narrowly; otherwise imagination is squelched and feelings are suffocated. When asked why he was so adamant about celebrating communion every Sunday (which Calvin was not permitted to do as a Protestant in Geneva), he pointed to the sacrament as an opportunity to give thanks and to proclaim ever so boldly, "Great is the mystery of faith!"

Since Calvin was not a strict Calvinist, I, as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA), do not feel any pressure to be one either, especially now that I am pastor of UPC. Calvinism sets up a block universe with which Calvin would be uncomfortable by suggesting that faith is static when, in fact, it is a journey—an adventure—through which human beings are constantly being fashioned by Word and Sacrament into Christ's image.

Scripture is consistent in asserting that this journey is initiated by God, and it takes place in stages. The Exodus story that Julia rehearsed for us this morning is marvelous for Lent, as it begins: "From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded." Lent invites us to travel through the darkest parts of our experience, to confront the sin in us and the sin in the world, and yet the Lenten story does not end there. Easter always comes.

That phrase—"the wilderness of Sin"—is incredibly provocative to me. If this were an educational event instead of a worship service, I would probably ask you to start naming wilderness experiences, and even though I do not yet know you well, maybe—just maybe—I am capable of predicting some of the responses: sickness (HIV/AIDS, cancer, clinical depression), death (of a parent, partner or child), sadness, loneliness, none of which, by the way, are necessarily caused by sin.

Then again, sin, in the Exodus story, does not belong exclusively to Israel. Sure, Moses is acutely aware of Israel's sin (as Israel seems to be acutely aware of Moses'), but that is part of being traveling companions (only God knows what Becki or Bill would say about me after traveling together to Thursday's presbytery meeting in Eufala). Throughout Hebrew Scriptures, slavery always is in the background, and slavery is Egypt's sin, though it does not belong exclusively to Egypt. As a native South Carolinian now serving in Alabama, slavery is part of my history; its legacy belongs to you and to me.

Remembering, as painful as it is, is important. To forget would be even more tragic. Moses is convinced that one of Israel's problems is that they do not remember Egypt. When they complain about being thirsty, he complains back, asking, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?"

The questions framed precisely this way cause me to squirm, because the object of the first sentence is “me,” and the object of the second sentence is “the Lord.” Listen closely to the rhetoric. Is Moses more concerned with Israel quarreling with him or with the Lord? Perhaps the lesson here is to remember that when we launch into pietistic rhetoric, to be careful to draw a thick distinction between ourselves and the Lord.

The Israelites have a firm grasp of the obvious; they are painfully aware of how human they are. Physical needs are not being met. Grumpiness ensues. Pointed rhetorical questions are asked. For example: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” Moses stops short of sarcasm. He resists any urge to say, “Yes, that’s why I brought you out of Egypt: to dry out and dry up.” Only God knows how the Israelites would have responded, and that is precisely the one to whom Moses addresses his concerns. He cries out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

Slavery begat violence when the Israelites were in Egypt and it almost begets violence in the wilderness. Tightening stomachs tighten grips on rocks now aimed at Moses. Calm, cool and collected, God says to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you (notice that, once again, God has Israel traveling in stages); take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile (maybe that will help them to remember the Exodus) and go.” God promises to be waiting for them at Horeb, to welcome them with a reception featuring cleanliness and water that will quench the thirst of every member on the journey.

Being of the opinion that stones are better beaten than thrown, God instructs Moses to, “Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses does so in clear sight of the elders, and at last, Israel’s thirst subsides, at least for now. Now he answers that question about bringing slaves out of Egypt by asking rather boldly, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Perhaps that is a question to ask in Washington or Bhagdad or Israel or Palestine this morning understanding that if the

Lord is among us, however “us” is defined, the Lord is among “them,” the other, the ones on whom we project our deepest, darkest secrets, fears, self-hatred and scorn.

Is the Lord among them? Is the Lord among us? Jesus, being the self-taught Jewish scholar that he is, asks similar questions in Samaria concerning women, those who are divorced and those whose feelings for one another are marginalized socially. By recognizing his physical deficiencies—his thirst—and the uselessness of labels, Jesus relates intimately, practically and spiritually to a person whose biography would cause any self-respecting Pharisee to gasp. All Jesus says initially is, “Give me a drink,” but that would be enough. The Samaritan woman knows this, and so does John. She puts the Lord her God to the test (before she confesses Jesus as Lord) by asking, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” John explains (in parentheses) that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” He does not say how Samaritans feel about this (only Jews), but prejudices rarely go only one way.

Jesus is thirsty, and he is humble enough to ask for help (Oh, that we all would allow ourselves to be so vulnerable). The Samaritan woman’s instinct is to help, especially after Jesus introduces mystical language, like “gift of God” and “living water,” into the conversation. She considers helping this stranger, this thirsty Jew, and then points out that there is a logistical problem: Jesus has no bucket, and the well is deep, deep, deep.

Rather than cast stones at Jesus, the Samaritan woman listens to what he has to say; and rather than emphasize his thirsty body—a thirst that he already has acknowledged—he concerns himself with the depth of the Samaritan woman’s pain. Ashamed that she is divorced and involved in a relationship that is not universally accepted, she is unwilling to be truthful with Christ, and yet Jesus knows her better than she knows herself, and he pursues a line of questioning that enables her to be honest with herself and with her Jewish neighbor. This confrontation (or, in fact, series of confrontations) leads her to proclaim, “Sir, you are a prophet.”

Christ is a prophet because of what he knows and who he worships. The Samaritan woman's Achilles heel, as Jesus charges, is that she worships what she does not know. The Gospel that he proclaims is that the day is coming when one's status as a Jew or a Samaritan will be irrelevant and that God will be worshiped *in* spirit and truth, because God *is* Spirit and Truth. In Jesus Christ, the Lord is here. God is among us. God is among them (whomever "they" may be), and God is calling both us and them to forget the distinction.

Christ is here at University Presbyterian Church and has been since the Civil Rights Movement (of which, you will notice, I am *not* speaking in the past tense). Christ has been here as you, as a congregation, have gravitated---and continue to gravitate--toward More Light, and the more light shines in the darkness, darkness does not overcome it. Stones were not made to be thrown; stones were made to be broken, because when stones are broken, living water comes pouring out of them. Every time the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments are celebrated, the church is being fashioned into a people who are less concerned with the tribe to which a person belongs and more with how the God who created heaven and earth is glorified. To this God, the God of all grace, who calls us to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever. Amen.