



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, March 19, 2017

*The Third Sunday in Lent*

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Exodus 17:1-7 | Psalm 95 | Romans 5:1-11 | John 4:5-42

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Confirmation classes, I try to give an overview of the major elements that make up the practice of our faith as the Episcopal tradition understands it. We cover topics like the Bible, how we Worship, Church History. Those are, by and large, easy things to talk about because they dance around the real reason why we are here: God. God, or more precisely, knowing God is the tough one. How do we do that? I can get stuck there. Everyone has their own image of God, and no two of them are exactly alike, which makes talk about God difficult, potentially explosive. But hasn't that always been the problem for people of all faith traditions?

As Christians we have our own ways of talking about God. One of the more elaborate is the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. "Three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity." (Articles of Religion, #1) Or, as I tell the Confirmands, three different and distinct aspects of the one unified God. Are we all clear on that?

It goes fairly well at the beginning. We talk about God the Father who created "heaven and earth...all that is, seen and unseen," as the creed says. While the Father may be wrapped in mystery we can at least admire the Father's handiwork and appreciate its elegant complexity. Then there's God the Son, Jesus Christ. The gospels tell us a lot about him. These stories and sayings help flesh out his character and give us some insight into his personality and thought. And we have the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist that, in a unique though not fully explainable way, joins us to him, and through him to each other. Things start to break down when we get to God the Holy Spirit. It's not easy to point to the Spirit or even describe her. We can talk about what she has done. The book of Genesis speaks of the Spirit moving over the primeval waters as an agent of creation. The book of Acts gives us a fantastic story of the Spirit descending on the disciples at Pentecost. We receive the gift of the Spirit at Baptism, as St. Paul alludes to today in his letter to the Romans, filling our hearts with God's love. It is our fervent hope that is the Spirit who guides the life and work of the Church.

But if you are still somewhat baffled by what the Spirit actually is, you are in good company. Christians have been trying to figure that one out for 2000 years. Which is just a continuation of the search for God that has been going on from the beginnings of the human race. In good times and in bad, in times of personal hardship and national crisis, such as we find the Israelites who are dying of thirst in today's reading from Exodus, the question is universal amongst humanity: "Is the Lord among us or not?"

We have a need to know that God is present. We need to know that God takes notice of us. We need to know that we are not alone, that God cares. Intimacy is what we seek. But how do we find that in something we can't see or lay our hands on?

This is one of the greatest challenges to belief. As with Nicodemus, whom we met last week, the Samaritan woman Jesus encounters at the well is another person seeking God in her world. She sought God on her level, probably never imagining that she could be brought to God's level. Like all of us, she had her own preconceived, doctrinally-limited notion of who and what God is.

When the Samaritan woman met Jesus she had centuries of cultural and ethnic biases coloring their encounter. Even though they were distant cousins, Samaritans and Jews were bitter enemies. The divide was as ugly as any family feud can get. But in Jesus she found something different. He was not what she expected, what she had always been told, what she assumed such a foreigner, such an adversary would be. Had she headed home the moment she caught sight of Jesus resting by the well, she and her neighbors would never have met their Messiah. But she didn't. He wasn't a threat, and this opened a door which she allowed herself to walk through.

It's at moments like that afternoon by a village well when the work of the Spirit becomes visible. It's the Spirit's job to make closeness to God a reality, but we will get stuck if we refuse to let the Spirit guide us into possibilities of meeting God in places and people we would least expect. We can search and search all we want, but if insist on our own way, we will get it. And "it" is unlikely to be God.

The Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that Jesus received at his baptism and that we received at ours, brings us to the Father. Jesus says that, "God is Spirit." If that is true, then one thing we can know is that it is God who takes the first step. The next move is ours. The Samaritan woman took it and met God in what she assumed was an enemy. Could we risk taking such a step in faith? The state of our world says very clearly that few people do. But she did, and for that, she found all that she ever desired.

The question for us and for our world is not, "Is God among us?" For God is among all of us. The real question is, "Are we prepared to meet God in the humanity God has created all around us, or not?"