

“At the Well,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 3/8/2026

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42

*Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go.*

Moses is dealing with a rebellious group. They are mad that there is no water and are wondering why he has dragged them out into the desert to die. So, God spoke to Moses and told him what to do.

*I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.*

The people complained, and God through Moses fixed the problem. Isn't that how all of this is supposed to work? You complain to me, I reach out to God, and miraculous results sprinkle downward. Everyone gets what they want. God is praised, the people are satisfied, and I get a nifty staff.

But if you have ever read through the Book of Exodus, you might come away with a different impression. God is right there advising Moses. Moses sends the plagues, defeats the Egyptians, and leads them all through the desert. Good work, good communication, good everything it seems. And yet the people complain. They lament their conditions. They demand water, they complain about the food or lack thereof. And we might think, look how ungrateful.

Please also note that the events of Exodus are supposed to transpire over the course of forty years. The Hebrew people are wandering in the wilderness in what appears to be an aimless fashion. The distance between the cities of Cairo and Jerusalem is over 400 miles. A long way to walk, but at least according to Google maps, you could walk there in a week. I did not factor in bathroom breaks.

That time spent wandering in the desert is not random. Forty is a number with Biblical overtones. In this case it represents something specific—the time it would take an entire generation of people to die. Because between leaving Egypt and finally settling in the Promised Land, every adult who set on that journey, except two, died along the way. Those two were Joshua and Caleb and that was because they did not sin against God over the course of those forty years. All the others, the sinners, were meant to die.

Even Moses was said to have sinned. In another instance of this same incident from the Book of Numbers, Moses struck the rock twice in anger instead of simply ordering the water to appear, which differed from God's instructions in that version. Now, you might be thinking that might not seem like a basis for punishing someone like Moses, a prophet chosen by God to lead his people out of slavery. Someone God spoke to regularly. And I would agree with you. I would agree that this does not seem like a reason for punishment, but I also do not happen to be God.

More importantly for our purposes, I also do not happen to be the person who wrote down that story. It goes on to say: *[T]he Lord said to Moses and Aaron: Because you did not have confidence in me, to acknowledge my holiness before the Israelites, therefore you shall not lead this assembly into the land I have given them.*

Someone wrote down that story about what God said. By tradition it was believed to be Moses. But there is no evidence that the Book of Exodus was written down at that time. The literal written language of Ancient Hebrew did not exist at that estimated time. Egyptian hieroglyphics maybe, but not Hebrew.

And so, it was a story. A campfire story as it were. A story told over the centuries. And a story which appears in one form in the Book of Exodus and in another form in the Book of Numbers.

Now you might be thinking, am I suggesting that the Bible is inconsistent? That the Bible is wrong? And I would answer those questions Yes and then No. The Bible is inconsistent in many respects. But no, the Bible is not *wrong*, because that word makes no sense when it comes to the Bible and what it contains. The Bible is a

collection of stories, laws, songs, poems, as well as some historical accounts. How exactly should we assess their “rightness”?

When we refer to a book from the Bible it could also be translated as a scroll. Imagine a pile of scrolls as in rolls of paper that curl up into a tube. Ones you have to flatten out to read, much like a Torah scroll if you have ever seen one. The Bible as a book is a compilation of texts from such scrolls, gathered and edited over many centuries.

Some scrolls are more important in the weight applied to them. The Books of Genesis and Exodus are arguably more significant than the Books of Tobit and Habakkuk. No one person wrote all of it down in one go. And countless hands have been ordering and recording them, translating and interpreting them, sorting out how these texts fit together and how they do not fit together. For some, that is the work of their lifetimes.

Compare that with the Bible you have on your shelf or in front of you in the pews. That is an orderly translation from multiple source languages offered up in tidy modern English, a language that did not exist in a recognizable form in the time of Jesus let alone Moses. I could break out a little Beowulf for you, and its Old English would still be 700 years too modern for Jesus.

When we read the Bible in this form, it has been heavily edited to suit our purposes as to language and as to theology. Yes, the Bible has been rewritten in many ways to suit our theological tastes. For example, last Sunday I made a change in our responsive reading to suit such sensibilities. The text we read went like this: *The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your soul.*

But that is not how the word should be translated if we are being consistent with the theology of the time of the Psalm writer. We should have said, *The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.*

Keep your life, not your soul. Because in the time of Ancient Israel, in the religion of the Israelites, there was no concept of a soul. That idea would come into the tradition after Israel was conquered and religious ideas from Greece made their way into common understanding. And not because the people of Judea had any great love for the Greeks, who had conquered them. No, it was because they *hated* the Greeks and wanted to see them eternally punished in hell. And therefore, you needed a concept of a soul to assure that someone might get their just punishment after this life.

Traditions change. Religious ideas change. The ways we function in community change. I recently wrote something about change happening at the speed of church. In case you were wondering, the speed of church is slower than you might expect or some might want. Because church can be about tradition, about small “c” conservatism. And that is not always a hotbed of change.

The word “church” itself is a created idea that grew out of an older one. The word has its origins in the original Greek as *ekklesia* and it could be written as “assembly” or “those called out.” It is the base of the term ecclesiology, meaning the study of the church.

The word for such a gathering could also be *kuriakon*, meaning belonging to the Lord, or *kuriakon doma*, meaning the house of the Lord. It gets shortened overtime and massaged through Germanic and Anglo-Saxon consonant shifts, and finally you get “church.”

What is church? Is it the building, meaning the literal church? Is it the congregation, a particular gathering of people regardless of the building, more like the organization than its location.

The building can include features that make it more church-like than otherwise. You might have a steeple. These were originally modest belltowers, like our own here at First Church, to call the people together for prayers or meetings. By the Middle Ages, they grew taller and pointier, as if to reach up to the heavens.

You would also have a place to gather, to assemble, to congregate. For any of you who have been to older European churches or cathedrals, you might have noticed that sitting was an afterthought. Because you were expected to stand for the whole service. You still see this in Orthodox Christian churches. The few chairs

available are reserved not for the elderly members, but for weak-kneed visitors, or so I have been told usually with great amusement.

And church would be a place for specific activities. Holding rituals, conducting services, leading processions. These mark the stages of life, from birth to marriage, from bearing children and to leaving this world at the last. Historically, it was how our lives were organized. The church year marked by feast days, the seasons of Advent and Lent, Eastertide and Pentecost. The high holidays and the various cultural expressions of those religious events.

Church was the center of everything. It was the cultural and moral axis. It was the school, the meeting house, and the social hub. It defined who one was and in many respects what you would do. And that has changed.

That has changed much like most of human society has changed. Church no longer has such an outsized influence over our lives. And while I have mixed feelings about those changes, I cannot say that I would want everyone to be under my particular thumb when it came to every aspect of day-to-day existence.

Think about Moses in the desert. They could not have survived without his intervention, even in the more complicated version from the Book of Numbers. Without Moses they would have died. And that image of religion as all-encompassing has been the case for much of human history.

When did that change? There were fits and starts, but I think the biggest shift was about 500 years ago, at least from a European perspective. When the Reformation splintered Christianity into many competing denominations, there were suddenly options. Maybe the option was in the next kingdom over, but there were options for the first time. And with options there becomes competition and with competition there becomes change. Some religious traditions tried to hold onto the reins of power, both religiously and politically, but that did not survive, one or two modern day theocracies notwithstanding.

And more than a few religious traditions bargained away that power. Martin Luther, for example, essentially undertook the political protection of German princes and in exchange he agreed to keep the church out of worldly affairs.

Others remained more closely involved, but in many cases became an arm of the government. The King of England is the head of the Anglican Church. The Orthodox churches took great pride in advising the Byzantine emperor and later the Russian Czar. But through that proximity to power, the religious often became political and the political did not necessarily become any more religious.

And as we might notice in our own time, when religion becomes closer to the centers of power, it is not religion that comes out ahead, but the political. When you shrink the expectations of the religious life down to, for example, the size of personal salvation, it becomes surprisingly easy for obedient religious leaders to forgive many forms of political excess and to excuse almost any form of corruption.

Again, I do not want to be the one telling you when to stand and when to sit, unless of course that is *literally* happening on Sundays and the poor folks in front are out of sync. Plus, I do not have a staff from God that would let me draw water from a stone. It would be handy.

One of the mistaken assumptions about church might derive from the ancient name of the Lord's house. It makes it seem like God lives inside, like in a nature preserve. Or perhaps like a sideshow. Yes, come one, come all. Spend two bits to see the Amazing Mark and his many clever tricks of the trade. He can't get water from a stone, but he can put you to sleep in under twenty minutes.

Personally I hope we are less of a spectacle than that and more of a gathering place like the notion of the assembly. The place that the congregation comes together to do...to do what?

To gather at the well. Like Jesus and the woman talking about the water in our extremely long Gospel reading.

Notice how this woman is having a back-and-forth conversation with Jesus. She is a Samaritan, a group of people that did not get along with those from Judea. Both were what we might describe as Jewish, give or take a

few traditions and practices. The Samaritans had been conquered before the Judeans and there was some lingering superiority written directly into the Bible. She mentions, for example, the holy places on the mountains because Samaritans did not, or could not, go to the Temple in Jerusalem. So, they went to mountain shrines close by as had been the ancient custom.

Jesus points out that the woman does not have a husband but has been with five different men. Meaning she was an adulterer or a fornicator. Not a comfortable exchange, mind you, but she stuck with the conversation. And notably, she was the one who gathered the Samaritans to seek out Jesus, to see and to hear him in the role of Messiah.

And yet, we do not know her name, even as she served in the same role as the Apostles going forth and bringing people in. Bringing people to the well. The well of the waters of eternal life.

And that is what I think church is about. Coming to the well. Not that this building is the only place to find water. But it is a place to find water.

A well served many purposes in the life of a community. Sometimes a well was the only place to get water and so it was the life's blood of a town.

A well was a place that you might gather to find out what was going on, how people were doing, or if there was any really good gossip. Church remains a gathering place and it remains a place to share information in all the good ways and sometimes the not so good ways. We can work on that.

For those reasons, a well was necessary for building a community. You needed water. You needed connection. You needed one another. Because it was hard to live. It was hard to do what was necessary to survive without that place of connection, whether it was at a well or in a church. It was hard to be alone.

And that changed. It is now far easier to be alone. It is far easier to get water, to get food, to get information without ever leaving the house. Yes, you need that house. Yes, you need some means of support. But as we saw during the pandemic, it has become incredibly easy to avoid human contact.

Water from the tap. Food delivered. Entertainment streamed into your home. Add to that a firehose of information. An endless feast of news and opinion, slick propaganda and anxious pontificating.

When you think about church, that thought process is often conditioned by your views of church. How you grew up or what you have read. So, what might church be about?

Church is for spiritual guidance and engagement. Church is for sacred music and familiar hymns. Church is about social action and community organizing. Church is about a refuge from a troubled world and a place for building a religious home.

And yet that sense of church is not shared by everyone in the same ways. Culturally in the United States, church has become less important even if religious belief remains common. People want to go it alone as spiritual not religious types who pray by themselves or on Facebook. Maybe a walk in the woods after a page or two from Thoreau and a poem or two from Mary Oliver.

That trend is not going to change because we try to do church harder. If we turn back to a bygone day when churches were full. Because the habit of church is no longer as strong as it was. Some people, some places, some cultures still have that habit and that is worth considering when we reach out into the world. But there are also reasons why people might come out to church, more so than not, even now.

Reasons like spiritual guidance and engagement. Like sacred music and maybe not so familiar hymns. Like social action and community organizing around questions that really matter to people in a time of great social change and societal upheaval. Church can be a refuge from a troubled world, or a resting place before going out into that world as people of faith.

Building a religious home is not the same as building a pillow fort that shuts out all the things we do not like. It is not about inviting people in so they can become just like those who are already here. It should be a gathering

place for people seeking spiritual sustenance and seeking a community of people. People dedicated to loving kindness. People dedicated to a sacred sense of curiosity about God, the universe, and one another.

Church is about building a community that is both as ancient as the scriptures and as new as a child born into a loving family. As we gather at the proverbial well, with Jesus teaching us and Moses leading us forward, it is about refreshing ourselves and being ready for the work of a community and tending the waters of everlasting life. Amen.