

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA  
February 24, 2008

Exodus 17:1-17  
John 4:5-26

## CAUGHT OFF GUARD

I think we load this story up with a lot of things that aren't there. You've been hearing people preach on this passage for years now; it's a favorite. They say things like, "Well, the mascara must have been really dark and the nails really bright, and the skirt a little too short on this woman by the well." They look at how many husbands she's had and they surmise that she is promiscuous or worse. They look at what's happening in her questioning and they say that she could not have possibly understood what Jesus was saying or what she was asking.

The facts simply don't bear those interpretations out. She comes in the middle of the day and we assume that she's been rejected by the other women who would have come in the cool of the evening to draw water for the next day's activities. Maybe she just came to the well when it wasn't busy and there wasn't a crowd. Maybe she came to the well because she had run out of the water she gathered the day before. In any event, there is nothing in Jesus' words that bring us to believe that he is speaking to her judgmentally, that he is concerned about who she is or what she has done in her past. Even his reference to her five previous husbands and the one she has now, who is not her husband, are based in fact and the words don't carry with them any indication that Jesus is speaking with her in order to convict her of sin.

Instead, Jesus is offering himself and he is teaching us an important lesson. If you want people to see Christ in you, the first thing you have to do is be vulnerable. He is there and he is thirsty. His disciples have gone away, and he can't get any water out of Jacob's well. Then the boy meets girl story starts. You remember how Jacob was at the well at noon and met Rachel—nobody thinks anything bad about Rachel or her history, yet it was noon when boy met girl there. This isn't a seductive story about Jesus and this woman, except in the sense that the church is the bride of Christ and that God in Christ has overcome every barrier that we have erected to keep people from hearing the good news or to say that we are right and they are wrong. Or to misconstrue the purpose of God's sending his only son into our circumstances.

You see, Jesus overcomes the barrier between males and females and he does so with a woman who is able to hold her own in a conversation with the Messiah. In fact, this is the longest discourse recorded in all of scripture between Jesus and anyone. I think she kept his attention because she asked the first theological question he had heard from any disciple. She kept his attention because she accepted that he was, indeed, the savior of the world. I wonder today as we prepare for our Lenten series tonight, could we say that really and truly this passage catches all of us off guard and that all the reasons we come up with to not do something for Christ, he's crossed the barrier. For all the people who we have excluded or deemed to be in error in the way they worship God, he has crossed a barrier.

If we take away anything from this passage today, take away the fact that Jesus goes to Samaria not to save nine hours on a journey to Jerusalem by walking around; but by walking through it, he shortens his trip, but then he spends two days there. It's not time consciousness that's bothering him—it's the fact that he wants the Samaritans to know that salvation is for the entire world. So whenever we tend to draw a line in the sand and say that church member over there is in error, or draw a line in the sand and say that those people out there don't understand—when we look across that line, we'll find what the Samaritan woman found: Jesus there waiting, broken and willing to heal us and those we have judged unworthy or excluded. You see, she was also broken and everything he did was a source of healing, an affirmation of her worth and function within the kingdom of God. What great news this is that not one of us has been left out, that God is always there calling us, wooing us into a precious relationship.

Thanks be to God.

*Also, during the service Dr. Syl Shannon spoke on Black History. Below is the information he gave the congregation today, during Black History Month.*

## **BLACK HISTORY – THE UNTOLD STORY**

Dr. Syl Shannon

It's the fourth Sunday in February; and if you've been watching TV this month, you'll know that February is Black History Month. Carl asked me to say a few words to the congregation about black history. I wondered how I could do that in five to seven minutes, and Carl assured me that I could do it. The idea hit me to put something on a piece of paper so that the congregation could read it. So I put down on the paper the story of the 44 years since integration began on the one side and the story about one of the first NBA basketball players on the other. If you read the stories, you will get the message. But I invite you, the congregation made up of heady Presbyterians who like to read and think. We have it on good authority. Francis Bacon said that reading makes a full man (or woman), writing an exact man, and conversation a ready man. Dwight David Eisenhower said, "You are what you read." Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The person who reads ahead, stays ahead." So I'm inviting you to become better readers; read more often. And the place where I want you to start today is to read the mini page in today's paper. It says that it is especially for kids and their families. The mini page for this week is about Sojourner Truth. The mini page last week was about George Washington, the first president. He was born February 22, 1732; and in 1772, the British changed the calendar, so he may have been born on February 11 or February 22—so he celebrated his birthday on both days. George Washington was a bright guy and he was our first president. You won't find it in any books, but he spent a lot of time in Gum Springs (along Highway 1). It is purported that he even had children who were born to some woman in Gum Springs. The last name was Ford (West Ford, I think). Now, as we get ready to elect the president, someone is making noise about being the first black president. If you read a lot, you'll learn that even our third president had to collect letters from his grandmother because he didn't want anyone to know that there were black

folks in his family. We have it on good authority that Lincoln, Coolidge, and my favorite president—Stonewall Jackson—all had black blood. So the black story and the white story are all intertwined. Not just from 1772, but from the very beginning. This is President's Month, and we are celebrating presidents and black history, so it's ironic that as we get ready to elect a new president that we have a black man and a woman running. Sojourner Truth would be very pleased because she was one of the first persons who fought for the rights of women to vote. Read your mini page today when you get home—don't forget.

My attitude about race relations have influenced everything I have done from 1944 until now because I went to the Boy Scout Jamboree in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, in 1948 and saw more Japanese boys, east Indian boys, and Korean boys than I had ever seen in my life. I noticed that when we talked about God and country, we were being "*religious*." When we reached out with interpersonal stories and relationships *right actions prevailed* and no one needed to act religious.

In America, and particularly in the state of Virginia, Presbyterians have played a great role in what has happened in racial history. Presbyterians and Congregationalists were probably the most important or active ones in terms of pushing for public education. I had the privilege in my third church to be in a town called Chase City, Virginia, named for Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase. But the important thing about that town is that a Presbyterian from New York named Thyne donated nine acres to set up Thyne Institute. By 1874, Thyne had donated the land to the Freedman's Bureau of the Presbyterian Church each Sunday afternoon, crossed the railroad tracks and taught Church School to former slaves at 4:00 PM. Before 1935, there were four black high schools in the State of Virginia: Thyne Institute, Hampton Institute, Virginia Union, and Manassas. Three of them were strongly influenced by Presbyterians and/or Congregationalists. When the school crises occurred in Prince Edwards County (during our lifetime—we seem to have forgotten that it was only 100 years earlier when it was against the law to teach blacks to read) and closing the public schools was imminent, Presbyterians should have stood tall because the most outstanding spokesman for the effort was an attorney named Oliver W. Hill, an Episcopalian, who had been trained at Howard University Law School. Hill lived to be 100 years of age, and four governors attended his funeral. Yet, when he was fighting for school equality, his salary from the NAACP was meager and those who recognized and supported him were few.

In 1910 when Boy Scouting began, it was inclusive. The oldest troop in America is at a United Presbyterian Church of Plainsfield, New Jersey. Troop 5 has been continuously active since 1912. When the Bible was translated into Goulash, which was the language of my fore bearers on the Outer Banks, for the first time, 200,000 people could say that they had a Bible in their language. The irony is that we as Presbyterians have sent missionaries everywhere and have been particularly effective in India and Korea. Yet in America today, we seem to have a hard time having what we had in the 40s: Brotherhood Sunday on the second Sunday of February. I would want one Sunday, any Sunday of the year, when congregations can come together and discuss or sing hymns that make the church the church. The deacons and elders met yesterday, and one thing that I learned from watching the film by Phyllis Tickle was the impact of music on the life of the church and I thought about it. In America today, if it were not for the black

influence, we wouldn't have songs like *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*, *Precious Lord, He's Got the Whole World in His Hands*, *If I Could Help Somebody*, just to name four.

So today, as we take a moment to recognize Black History Month, let's be honest with ourselves. No matter who we are or where we live, we live in a society that is not a melting pot, but is more like a mixed salad. We live in a culture that is in denial about race and racism. There are lots of people related to lots of people, and they don't want to talk about it. But if you read your history carefully, you can authenticate that Jefferson, the third president and Lincoln, the sixteenth president, and Coolidge and Jackson had black blood in their veins. The irony in America is that one ounce of black blood makes you black (according to earlier laws), so we shouldn't even waste our time worrying about whether Obama is black enough or white enough to be elected. I'm not telling you who to vote for because I'm a Lincoln Republican and I will always be. The history of most folks are constantly being reviewed. You owe it to your fore parents to learn all you possibly can about your family tree. Our allegiances are to more than flags and territories—our loyal views are enhanced when we hear and understand the stories of our parents, grandparents, and others in the family.

Two more things, then I'm finished. On the table you will find 17 questions. I got these questions (maybe 10 or 12 of them) from the wife of a Presbyterian minister who worked at Carroll College in Wisconsin. Joyce Houk, RN, was from Michigan and she was married to one of the finest Presbyterian ministers from Michigan. Neil Houk was in North Carolina, when he died last year; he had been a missionary in Lebanon and they both cared about people and history. The purpose of these questions was to help people write their family history, and I turned it into a vehicle to help people with their spiritual journey, too. Take it, use it for your family, and work hard on knowing everything you can know about every grandparent and great-grandparent—every aunt and every uncle—so that you can tell your children's children as the scripture says today in Joshua's voice. Paul Harvey would end by saying, "The rest of the story is in your hands." Make sure you write it or put it on video. Thank you.