

The Place of Worship (John 4:19-23)

Sermon Title: "The Place of Worship"

Scripture: John 4:19-23

I saw a social media post some days ago by a theologian who wrote something akin to the words, "This is my church today" and a photo of a deck overlooking a body of water with the sun and clouds in the sky. The only indication that a human was present in the moment was a small foot that jutted out of the bottom right of the photo. We can tell that the photographer was likely lounging around enjoying the scene when the theologian took the photo. And when I immediately saw it, I laughed, not because I disagreed with the claim or the idea that meeting on the beach or oceanfront (or a pier) could be church, but because I knew what the theologian was doing, in effect: the poster's new statement would declare war on traditional Christians who've always prioritized meeting in physical buildings at geographic locations. And when you declare war on tradition and the traditional way of doing things, prepare to receive large backlash. Martin Luther, anyone?

Just as expected, the theologian received backlash for the post and the words "This is my church today." One believer quoted Hebrews 10:24-25 about not "forsaking the assembling of ourselves together." The theologian was accused of "defining church as riverside coffee." Someone else said in response to the post and photo, "This is utter paganism." Another proceeded to define church as it is in the Greek (the Greek word ekklesia means "called out ones") and told the theologian, "You can't have 'church' without the fellowship of other believers." Jon, one of the commenters, said, "Another thought: Just as the Lord in the Old Covenant was pleased to meet with His people in His temple and to reveal Himself in a special way, in the New Covenant the gathered body of Christ, 'the assembly,' the 'church' is now His temple. One woman named "Deborah" said, "Sorry. It's not your church. It's God's church and you should be in it." Richard said, "Perhaps you're worshipping a different god other than the one true God. Putting yourself before the King." Davis wrote, "Negative...You are purporting a man centered and selfish theology regarding the church. Seek the Scriptures, I urge you."

There were some sensible responses, such as the fact that the individual is involved in full-time ministry in a local church but was taking some time off to rest and have personal communion with God. There was also the discussion of church not being a geographic location but the communion of a believer with God - and that it can occur even outside the walls of a church. And these are good and acceptable responses. But what puzzled me the most was the hatred and bigotry in the comments, vitriolic responses from people who are such products of established religion that they don't know where the rules of established religion end and the Word of God begins. Their responses demonstrate that they are 21st-century Pharisees who've given in to legalism involving a physical building or structure, with multiple numbers of believers. If a person is unable to meet in a church building or with a few other individuals, then, in the minds of many of

the commenters, there is no such thing as a church that takes place. This means that sick and shut-in victims can't have church at home in front of the television set, even if they're getting praise, prayer, worship, and the Word of God by way of a television program. And if a person's body is too tired from working 6 days a week to get out of bed to go to a physical church service with multiple people, then he or she can't have church at home with God because listening to a sermon online by audio, video, or TV isn't considered in the Pharisaical definition of "church."

The building church vs. internet church vs. alternative locations for church debate is one that has become the new dividing line in the 21st-century church. By many individuals' standards, even The Essential Church, a fully internet-connected church, is unbiblical, opposed to the Word of God, and a church of my own devising. And yet, what would you say if I told you that the Lord spoke to me back in mid-July to form this internet church? What if the Lord told me to found an internet church, one that would be accessible online and aid those who are sick, shut-in, and shut-out of traditional building churches, who need somewhere to go and worship, some assembly in which to reside that won't condemn them because they aren't popular, the church favorite, or have enough deep connections? Sure, you can't measure what I say when I tell you that God told me, but I can. I know how the Lord spoke to me. He spoke to me the same way He spoke to me 15 years earlier when He told me that I was called to preach the gospel? He asked me a "what if" question then, and He asked me something akin to the same 4 months ago. And I pose a question to you today: What if the commenters who chided the theologian in question were wrong themselves, even if they pointed to a few verses in the Bible? Some believe that heresy and spiritual waywardness come about because of the absence of Scripture, but today, even having scriptural support that one twists to his or her advantage can be labeled "heresy" or spiritual waywardness as well. Because one points to the Bible and quotes a verse doesn't mean that the individual is right in his or her claims.

So today, we're going to talk about the idea of church and what it means to have church. And fortunately, there is a biblical passage that is an excellent place to start speaking of this: It is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 4. Here in John 4 we see a chapter devoted to the countercultural. Jesus leaves Judea to go to Galilee because the Pharisees have heard of Jesus' ministry: His disciples have baptized more than John the Baptist had. In order to get to Galilee, though, Jesus has to go through Samaria, a place that consists of half-Jews and half-Gentiles known as Samaritans. The Samaritans were considered to be half-breeds by the Jews, the "less-thans" of their day. The Jews felt superior to the Samaritans because the Jews themselves weren't Gentile (and Gentiles were considered to be outside of salvation then). Remember the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 who took the man beaten by thieves and left for dead to an inn and paid for his medical care and expenses? Jesus told the Parable to the Jews about their neighbor to show them that a Gentile had more kindness than they. Remember Jesus teaching about the widow at Zarephath in the temple in Luke 4:26 when He went in to read Isaiah 61 from the scroll? The Jews were so upset with Him that they wanted to lay hands on Jesus and kill Him. In Jewish society, it was the highest insult to tell a Jew that a Gentile was better at anything as compared to a Jew. Being placed beneath a Gentile was a large insult to a Jew, one who believed that he was part of God's chosen people, one who had access to the Law and salvation and had history on his side.

It is this Samaria, this place of the Gentiles, that Jesus had to travel through to get to Galilee. And yet, our Lord doesn't try to find a detour; He goes through the place that few Jews ever wanted to travel. The interesting thing is that the Jews themselves forgot that Abraham, their forefather, was a Gentile, for only with Jacob did God change Jacob's name to Israel in Genesis 32:28. Abraham, Jacob's grandfather, left Haran to obey God's order in Genesis 12:1, when God told him to get out of his country. He moved from Ur of the Chaldeans to Haran as a young man with Sarai his wife and his father, Terah. The Lord reminds Israel of its Gentile ethnic background in the Book of Ezekiel where He says in Ezekiel 16:3, "Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: "Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite." The Lord reiterates this in Ezekiel 16:45. Abraham, Israel's father, was an Amorite, and Sarah, Israel's mother, was a Hittite. We know that Amorites and Hittites are Gentiles, because the Lord mentions them in the Torah (the first 5 books of Scripture) as two of the nations the Lord was driving out of the land of Canaan that He would give to Israel. Yes, it might be hard to swallow, but it's true: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all Gentiles, and the twelve sons of Jacob were the heads of what would become the nation of Israel. Thus, every Jew in the nation of Israel can trace its roots back to the Gentiles. It's interesting that the Jews hated the Samaritans when the Jews and Samaritans were close kinship cousins!

Jesus comes to Sychar in Samaria, and sits down by Jacob's well. A woman comes to the well, to get water, and it's around the sixth hour, John 4 says. That would place the time at around 12 noon because, if you remember, Jesus died in the 9th hour of the day when He was crucified (that would've been around 3pm). The Samaritan woman comes to get water from the well (we presume she was drawing water for herself, or her family, possibly), and Jesus tells her, "Give Me a drink." This is countercultural, because the Samaritan woman immediately responds with the words, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" in verse 9. John tells us why she asks this question: "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." John alerts us to the society in which Jesus and the Samaritan woman find themselves: both exist in a culture where Jews and Gentiles didn't speak to each other. The Jews thought it an insult to address Gentiles as people (that tells you what they thought of their kinship cousins).

Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter: He addresses her because, though she is a Samaritan woman, He sees her as a person who, like Jews, needs the grace of God. What we should learn from this is that everyone, no matter the ethnicity or gender, is a person who needs salvation, who needs the gospel, who is loved by the Lord. After all, God so loved the world that He gave Jesus, did He not? Everyone is special to God, made in His image after His likeness, and one for whom Jesus came to earth. Christ excludes no one, neither man nor woman, from salvation.

It's interesting that, while Jesus sent the disciples to "the lost sheep of Israel," He addresses the Samaritan woman about salvation. His words to her, in verse 10, that "if you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." He goes on to tell the Samaritan woman that the water from the well is temporary, that if she drinks it, she will thirst again, but the water He gives is eternal and she will never thirst after drinking it. Jesus is talking to her about "a fountain of water springing up into eternal life," as He calls it in John 4:14, and the Samaritan woman wants this eternal water that will kill her thirst. She wants eternal life, she wants to be saved, and despite her ethnicity, that she is a Samaritan and therefore, a Gentile (not to mention a woman), Jesus is willing to give her eternal life.

First, Jesus does the counter-cultural when He addresses the Samaritan woman. Next, He implicitly addresses the counter-cultural state of the woman's life: He asks her to call her husband to come in verse 16. She responds truthfully in verse 17 with the words, "I have no husband." Jesus affirms this, then reveals His knowledge of her in verse 18: "For you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband," He says. The Samaritan woman's lifestyle was counter-cultural. She had been married 5 times, and was in a common law relationship but wasn't married to the new man. Have you ever heard of a person who's been married that many times but never widowed? That is the case with the Samaritan woman here. For her to be married 5 times and divorced 5 times didn't look good in the world. Women were expected to marry one man and settle down, for multiple marriages looked promiscuous in their day (it does today, still), but what is most shocking is that Jesus tells her this knowledge. Why? He does it to let her know that He wasn't just an ordinary man, that He knew her past and her present and still wanted to talk to her. Her reputation didn't matter to Him because, in His eyes, she was still a life worth saving. To the Pharisees, the Samaritan woman would've been treated as a prostitute. She would've been treated the same way as the woman caught in the act of adultery, viewed as promiscuous and a prostitute in theory if not in practice.

And yet, Jesus exposes her counter-cultural lifestyle, something that would've been taboo to mention, yet He brings it up anyway. What happens through this exposure is that she discovers that He is no ordinary man --- which is what moves her to say in verse 19 that "I perceive you are a prophet." Now that she knows He is from God, she approaches Him about a topic of immense importance to Jews and Samaritans in her day, the place of worship. In verse 20 she says, "Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." She's quite educated about religious life. She is a woman who draws water, yet she is no stranger to theological discussion. Her comment shows that she's been observant of religious tradition, that Jews and Gentiles don't worship on the same mountain. Jesus addresses her and says in verse 22 that salvation is of the Jews, which is true, and we would expect a Jew to say this in discussion. This statement of salvation being from the Jews was conventional. And yet, what Jesus says in response is not. First, He says that an hour, a time, is coming, when worship will not take place "on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem," in verse 21. Next, He says in verses 23 and 24 that "the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit

and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

What the Lord is saying here is that in His day, the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem in the Temple where God placed His name, and Samaritans worshipped on the mountain in Samaria. And yet, God the Father is seeking true worshippers who worship the Father in spirit and in truth. God is Spirit, He is not man, and because He is Spirit, He is to be worshipped in man's inner being in accordance with godliness, not in a building. Building worship is no substitute for true worship done out of a pure and sincere heart before the Lord.

Make no mistake, the Lord's words here are counter-cultural. They were counter-cultural then, and they're counter-cultural today. In the day of the Samaritan woman, the Jews and Samaritans differed over the place of worship. Today, believers still debate the place of worship, but today's church debate is all about building churches with street addresses versus internet churches and alternative scenes (such as churches that meet outdoors instead of an indoor facility). As with the theologian I mentioned earlier, some choose to worship in the great outdoors where there is no physical building structure, and traditionalists, fans of organized religion, would say that a church building is the place to go. As the Jews did in the days of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, so do traditionalists today claim that their "mountain," their designated place of worship, their physical buildings, are the "true" and "legitimate" places of worship. Meeting outdoors, meeting with God as a party of one in one's home if he or she is sick and shut-in, meeting with God in the Swiss Alps to read and study the Word of God as one contemplates the beauty of creation, is illegitimate, invalid, and sinful, and one needs to repent and confess his or her sin if he or she decides to approach these "non-traditional" strategies to weekly worship.

And yet, those who say such things prove through their words that they haven't read the Word of God and considered the whole of it, not just their favorite verses. First, let's start with the idea of a single place of worship. As the Samaritan woman says in John 4, the Jews were to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, but this wasn't always the case. Moses addressed the Israelites in Deuteronomy 12, telling them the word of the Lord that He would prescribe a single place of worship:

"5 "But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. 6 There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. 7 And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the Lord your God has blessed you.

8 "You shall not at all do as we are doing here today—every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes— 9 for as yet you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you. 10 But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies round about, so that you dwell in safety, 11 then **there will be the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide.**" (Deuteronomy 12:5-11)

What does it mean here that "every man" was "doing whatever is right in his own eyes"? It means that the Jews weren't meeting in one place, one geographic location, but rather, meeting as they desired. Each Jew or Jewish family was meeting and worshipping God in their own way, which meant that some could've been worshipping in their homes while others worshipped outdoors, in the woods (as they traveled), and so on. The Jews did not have a centralized worship service or location up to this point in Deuteronomy 12. The Lord wanted them to know that after crossing the Jordan River over into the Promised Land, they would settle in the land and have a settled place to worship. They'd also have a temple as well, and we see that when Solomon dedicates the Temple in 1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 7.

So, if everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes, what were they doing? How were they observing the ritual of worship in the absence of a place of worship? They were building altars to God as they encountered Him on their travels. From the beginning of Israel's history, starting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Patriarchs, believers in God met with Him as they traveled from one place to another. If they met God in a dream, a vision, or an angel of the Lord appeared to them, they built an altar in that place and offered sacrifices (what later Jews did within the Temple). In Genesis 8:20 after coming out of the Ark, Noah built an altar to the Lord and offered a burnt offering from all the creatures that came out of the Ark. Abraham, "Abram" at the time, built an altar at Shechem in Genesis 12:7. In Genesis 12:8, Abram built an altar between Bethel (West) and Ai (East) and "called on the name of the Lord." That means Abram worshipped God in that place, at that altar. That was Abram's "church" experience in the Old Testament. In Genesis 13:18, Abraham built an altar at Hebron and worshipped. In Genesis 22, where Abraham offers up his son Isaac, the Lord tells him to offer Isaac in the land of Moriah and build an altar there. In Genesis 33:20, Jacob builds an altar in Shechem, calls on the name of the Lord, and names the altar El Elohe Israel --- which means "God, the God of Israel."

In Genesis 35:7, it says that Jacob built an altar "and called the place El Bethel, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother." In Exodus 17:15, Moses built an altar to the Lord and called it "The Lord Is My Banner" because God had given the Jews victory by way of Joshua in battle against the Amalekites. In Exodus 20:24, the Lord says, "24 An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. **In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you.**" The Lord says that in every place He records His name, not a single place but in multiple places, He would meet with the Israelites.

This is what the Israelites had been doing for worship before they crossed over into the Promised Land. There was no one "place" of worship, but many places. It's what we'd call "worship-on-the-go."

Today, though, the Israelites don't worship in just one Temple; instead, there are multiple synagogues, established in different locations so that local residents can worship. We see this with the reference to "synagogues" (plural) in the four Gospels, hinting that centralized worship retained some central component but was transformed to reflect the diversity of Jewish living and Israelite residency. That is, every Jew couldn't go to the same synagogue for worship; there were synagogues established in various cities, similar to the multitude of churches in various cities for Gentiles today.

Some would agree that worship is not tied to a geographic location, but they'd employ another caveat: "worship is only worship as long as it involves two or more people. "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them," Jesus says in Matthew 18:20. Yes, the Lord says this and we are to obey it. But what does it mean? Some have used this verse to browbeat the above theologian by saying that this means that only two or more people can have church, that a single individual cannot have "church" as we know it. But what is church? Is church not communion with God? If one cannot "do church" unless he or she is gathered with one or more additional believers, then are we not saying that God is not present with individual believers? Are we not saying that God is absent from meeting with a believer because he or she doesn't have enough people in the gathering --- as if to say, if there aren't two or three people, God refuses to meet with His child?

Think about this statement above. If God only communes with two believers, then no believer alone can experience communion with God - which means that God does not dwell within us but instead, within the assembly. This gathering-centric view is dangerous because it denies that the Holy Spirit, God, lives within us and communes with us as a result. And there are a few examples from Scripture that we can ponder when dwelling on this "two or three gathered" question. First, what about John the Baptist? The Gospels tell us that John the Baptist was out in the wilderness shouting the gospel message. John the Baptist was given a solo ministry; nope, he didn't have any disciples out in the wilderness baptizing for him. He baptized every person himself. How do you think his ministry started? Do you think he was out there with two or more believers when he was sent into the wilderness to start his ministry? What about the Old Testament patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who didn't have an assembly of two or more God-fearers when they were building their altars to the Lord at specific places. Did God not meet with them to reveal things to them? If we take the gathering-centric view as correct, then what do we do with these individual altars built in places where there was no physical building or address?

Now, let's look at other examples. Take Paul. He says that when he received the Word of the Lord for his ministry, he went out into the wilderness for 3 years. Here is his testimony from Galatians 1:

15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. 20 (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.) (Galatians 1:15-20)

Paul says he was out in the wilderness of Arabia for 3 years. Was he unchurched? If you say "yes" because he was out there alone with he and God, then you have to explain why Paul "forsook the assembling of the saints," as some would say. Why did Paul just abandon the synagogue for 3 years? I don't see him as having forsaken the assembling of the saints (from Hebrews 10:24-25), but some would say he abandoned it. If you're uncomfortable saying that Paul was unchurched for 3 years, you have to find a way to account for his 3-year absence from human life and from the synagogue. He wasn't being taught the elementary doctrines of the faith by human teachers or the apostles, but by God. God was his teacher. It's an unusual experience in Scripture, but that doesn't mean it's illegitimate. And if God did it for Paul, who's to say someone else won't have a similar experience? Will we judge that person, call them unchurched, and tell them they're creating their own religion and rewriting Scripture just because we can't handle the idea of God doing something different than our expectations allow?

What about the Apostle John, the disciple whom Jesus loved? We read that John was exiled to the Isle of Patmos for his faith and the gospel, and I can imagine that he didn't have much company on the isle except for the guards that were to constantly watch him day and night. And yet, while he's out there, in the Spirit on the Lord's Day (Sunday, many would say), he gets a vision of the end times, which is what the entire Book of Revelation is all about. "Revelation," called "Apokalypsis" in the Greek (from where we get the English word "apocalypse"), means "unveiling." Was John out of line because he, being exiled, couldn't meet with other fellow believers? Was the worship he gave to Jesus on the island unacceptable, invalid, and illegitimate because it wasn't done in a gathering of multiple believers?

From these examples, we see that, as Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, worship is not tied to a mountain. It is not tied to a geographic location with a physical address (such and such road, city, state, and zip code). But many of us are also wrong to assume that church, communion with God, occurs only in the presence of two or three believers, that if a person finds himself or herself in unique geographic circumstances, his or her worship to God is unacceptable. We celebrated Thanksgiving this past week, but

as the good old gospel song says, "Everyday is a day of thanksgiving." Yes; and every day is also a day of worship, not just Sunday or the Sabbath. And every limb we have, as I preached last Sunday in my Psalm 100 sermon ("Living a Life of Gratitude: How to Worship God"), is set aside as a living sacrifice to God for our reasonable worship Paul tells us in Romans 12:1-2. Worship can be done with the body of Christ, but it can also be done alone. And in particular circumstances, believers may find themselves having to have church alone. That doesn't make them ungodly, and it doesn't mean they're trying to go around God's prescription but that, rather, their circumstances allow for little else. As we've seen with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they offered sacrifices to God, prayed to Him, and worshipped Him --- and the person praying and worshipping also acted as priest to offer the sacrifices, too!

Jesus tells Peter that it is upon his confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, that the church is built. That is, the church consists of believers. Even when you are unable to be in the physical church or at the local church, you never stop being part of the church universal. As my now deceased pastor and father in the ministry once said, "The church is not a building; the church is in your heart." Your heart is the church, the place of communion with God, the place of worship, that, as Jesus says, worships the Lord in truth. What matters most to God is not the physical place of worship, but that inner place of worship, the spirit of man, where everything about us is laid bare before God. God wants us to worship Him in spirit and in truth, with the whole heart, mind, and being, in a way that accurately reflects Him, that the Father wants true worshippers who aren't so concerned about the externals. Whether the Samaritan woman worshipped on the mountain of the Samaritans or in Jerusalem, she was one who loved God and believed in Him, and the Lord was pleased to have such a conversation with her. And when she realized that the Messiah, who she said at first "was coming," was standing in front of her, she ran into the city and told "men," the Greek word for people or humanity, to "Come see a Man who told me everything I ever did."

I want to conclude today by saying that God is looking for true worshippers, those who know they need God, those who don't care where they are as long as they can raise their hands, acknowledge their God, and praise Him both within and without. God is not seeking Pharisees who prize the externals over the internals, who would rather make animal sacrifices than be living sacrifices and help someone along the way who may be beaten by thieves and left for dead, who would rather pray in the synagogues to be seen of men than in their secret closet where God acknowledges them, who would rather pay their tithes but neglect the weightier matters of the faith such as justice and mercy, who would rather exalt themselves as being better than tax collectors instead of repenting of their own sin and humbling themselves before God, who would rather make the Word of God of none effect through their tradition. Those who prioritize meeting in a physical structure or building are the 21st-century Pharisees who don't understand that God prioritizes internal worship, sincerity, and humility, that which is in the heart while not neglecting the external testimony before men (remember: let your light so shine before men, Jesus says in Matthew 5:16).

Yes, we should assemble, and there's something special about the gathering of believers. But worshipping on a mountain, in a building, or in a physical structure rather than the internet or some alternative means doesn't make one any closer to God or more holy than anyone else. As I've heard it said, "you can't judge someone's choices when you don't know their options." Perhaps the theologian mentioned above didn't have any other option for the day. Her circumstances, nor anyone else's, do not separate her (or them) from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.