

March 8, 2026
Third Sunday in Lent

“In His Spirit and Truth”

John 4:5-26

What does it mean to be one who “goes to church”? The stereotype the culture slaps on churchgoers is that the “good folks” go there, or at least the ones who think they’re good folks. I’m sure there’s some truth to that. There are some denominations that kind of push the idea that they are the “good” ones. I’m sure in every denomination there are those Pharisee types who think they are pretty righteous by their own obedience and piety.

You have to be a pretty dense Lutheran to think that way. We confess to be “poor, miserable sinners” and rightly know that in church we receive gifts of the pure mercy of God’s grace; forgiveness of our sins and the assurance of salvation and life everlasting by the merit of Jesus Christ alone. But still, some of that thinking may still prevail—that we are doing something upright by our church attendance, by doing the ritual of rising and going to God’s house every Sunday morning.

Jesus makes pretty clear to this woman at the well in Sychar that one’s going to a certain building or location for worship really is not worth a hill of beans if that worship is misfocused. He makes it obvious that He is ushering in a new kind of worship.

When this woman, seemingly to change the subject from her less-than-honorable living arrangement, brings up the competing worship sites of Mt. Gerizim for the Samaritans and Jerusalem for the Jews, well any Jew is going to point out that Jerusalem, the city of David, the location of the first temple built by Solomon, is indeed the correct place any worshiper of Yahweh should go. But Jesus voids that thinking.

“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

The hour has come in Christ where Jerusalem is no longer the proper worship place. In fact, the place of worship doesn’t really matter anymore. There is still worship, mind you, but the location is no longer paramount, but the nature of worship is. This, of course then begs the question; what does it mean to worship “in spirit and truth”?

Some have suggested this means to worship in soul and in mind. I can see that because faith is a matter of the inclination of your heart, but I don’t think it goes far enough. And I don’t think the deeper meaning is too hard to find either. Jesus says *“I am the way, **the truth** and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.”* It is the Gospel truth of Christ crucified and risen that brings salvation. Christ said, *“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”* and He was speaking about Himself. Jesus says, *“No one can come to **me** unless the Father who sent me draws him”* and we know the Father does that through the Holy Spirit pointing to Christ. And as Jesus speaks these words, we know that Jesus is the only human being to perfectly worship the Father in spirit and truth. So to worship in spirit and truth simply means to worship in Christ Jesus Himself.

You’d think this would be an obvious truth easily accepted by believers. After all, we’re believers because we trust in Christ alone as our Savior and Redeemer.

Yet consider how much baggage we bring along with us to worship. There can be that self-righteousness I talked about earlier. But there can also be the opposite; our guilt and sorrow over our sin that we allow to take center stage. Repentance is great, but if that's the singular thing you're doing in worship, you're kind of missing the point.

The ritual of worship itself can become the emphasis. We make sure we do all the parts right like we're using a recipe; going through the right motions. Or it can be the emotions—trying to feel the right, I don't know, zeal? Peace? Spiritual excitement?

And of course, for the parents of young children worship can simply be a desperate struggle to keep the child quiet and content while trying to focus enough to get some spiritual tidbit out of the service.

But the wondrous thing is that through all that noise, right worship in spirit and truth can take place simply by knowing Christ; that He has died and risen and is where He has promised to be—with us as we gather in His name and giving us His gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation. Our worship, however feeble, unfocused and distracted it may be, is always and only aimed at, and enabled by, Christ our Savior, and thus, it is worship in spirit and truth.

When a faithful mother is continually distracted by her child, Jesus is still giving to those who are seeking. When the Pastor's sermon is going over your head or is just really boring, the Gospel is being proclaimed into your ears and you're getting it, because you came seeking Jesus. When you can't even ponder the lyrics because you're too busy trying to hold the obscure tune of some Lutheran hymn you swear you've never even heard of before, Jesus is joyfully receiving your praise because you came to give it to **Him**. If the ritual seems like just going through the motions, but you're going through the motions to give glory to your Savior, you are worshiping in spirit and truth.

And of course, as this worship reaches its climax and you kneel at the rail a beggar in desperate need of divine grace, you know you receive Jesus' body and blood, for you for the forgiveness of sin. Trusting His promise fulfilled therein, you are worshiping in spirit and truth.

Why am I making this point? Because you never should leave this Divine Service feeling unfulfilled, because Jesus is here for you. This is important to know in spirit and truth, because this is only an hour and 15 minutes clearly and communally focused on Christ out of an entire week that we strive to spend in constant worship of Christ in spirit and truth. This is the Sabbath rest for the spiritual refreshment to carry you through the week. Here it is joy to worship rightly. The rest of the week it's pretty hard work to stay focused on being a living sacrifice to the Lord, everything you do as worship in spirit and truth.

Yet even and maybe especially there, in the world, you continually worship in spirit and truth. Of course there you get distracted, trip up and chase worldly passions even fall in to idolatries and sins; the Holy Spirit again and again shows you the truth of your failure by the Law and leads you to right repentance in the Gospel of Christ, and you look to Jesus and receive His grace. You remember your Holy Baptism into His death and resurrection and know that He has made you a new creation, His possession, a saint of God. And you walk again into your life, forgiven, a spiritual living sacrifice of worship in spirit and truth.

The main point I want to make today is that we may doubt ourselves because we are sinners and we tend to bring a lot of earthly baggage with us when we come before God, even on Sunday mornings. So it may trouble us when we hear Jesus say, "*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth,*" because it seems to us we are lacking in our worship. Don't focus on your worship. Focus on He it is that you worship. His spirit and truth fills all that you lack before the Father; Sundays and every other day of your week.

Amen.