

Trinity Lutheran Church, Terre Haute, Indiana Sermons
by Pastor Karen Husby – January – June 2023

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What's God Up To? Hosea 5:15-6;6 Matthew 9: 9-13, 18-26 June 11, 2023
Pentecost 2

What's God up to in our world today? In today's lessons, we see that God is not boxed in by conventional attitudes and expectations. Jesus shows us that God is making healing and wholeness happen in a broken and divided world, uncovering hope and transforming lives. God has a mission; *how* does God do what God is up to? Well, through mercy—through selfless compassion, love in action—and *not* through the many self-serving human structures and strategies that we too often want to rely on. Instead, God calls us to become a part of that mission of healing and wholeness.

When we want to know what God is up to, we can look to the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus invited Matthew to join him in his trusted inner circle. Now, Matthew was a surprising choice. Tax collectors for Rome had to turn over their quota of taxes, but they kept whatever else they could get, for themselves. They were judged to be selling out their own people by exacting taxes for the occupying Roman Empire. Tax collectors, along with women and thieves, were not allowed to give testimony in Israelite courts.

Matthew was despised as a traitor and a cheat, yet Jesus calls him to follow him and be his disciple. But calling Matthew is not a token do-good gesture on Jesus' part. The text tells us that he joined MANY "*tax collectors and sinners*" for dinner. The pillars of respectability took one look and freaked out. Maybe they could tolerate the inclusion of one such sinner, although that would be hard enough -- Jesus was, after all, scandalizing the religious regulars by breaking all the rules for how you were supposed to act in order to be right and ready for God. But here Jesus was choosing to hang out with the whole crowd. Jesus didn't just let one loan shark in the back door of the church. He's hanging out at the pool hall. This, the Pharisees judge, is totally out of control. This chaos, this total disregard for God's law was completely unacceptable to them. *Especially* from one who claimed to be acting in God's name.

God *was* at work in the person of Jesus; we ask, "*how* is God doing that work?" "*I desire mercy—steadfast love-- and not sacrifice.*" We heard that in both our first lesson from Hosea and in the Gospel. The Pharisees were invested in *doing things right* – that's the "sacrifice" part– but Jesus tells them that they are missing out on God's vision for *doing the right thing*. That "mercy" stuff *continues* to be a challenge. There is a difference between "*doing things right*" and "*doing the right thing*." So, we need to keep watching for the work of Holy Spirit: "*What is it that God is up to here and now?*"

We hear today about a whole string of healing and transforming actions that Jesus takes, actions that challenge the religious and social customs of the day. First, he's eating with a bunch of "*tax collectors and sinners*." You were supposed to be *very careful* about who you ate with. Some actions just were not acceptable socially or religiously. They were banned, considered "unclean."

Then suddenly a leader of the synagogue bursts into the sinner-dinner party, ditching his own disdain for the tax collectors and sinners. He kneels at the feet of Jesus, pleading. He's broken, desperately in need of the mercy of God. "*My daughter is dead; come lay your hand on her, and she will live.*" Sometimes, when it's someone we know and love who needs help, the rules get left behind out of the crying need for mercy.

So, Jesus leaves the forbidden diners at the table and heads out to help the synagogue leader, even though his little girl has died and dealing with a dead body is also taboo. I suppose Jesus might have chosen to help an important person anyway; like it might be a good public relations strategy to get the leaders on his side.

But then the story takes *yet another* turn. A woman suffering from a hemorrhage for 12 years came up behind Jesus. This woman was just about as ritually unclean as you could get. She was bleeding, and not the usual period—which was annoying enough because of all the rules around it. Her continuing hemorrhage meant that she had been cut off from the community for 12 years. If people touch her, they get unclean too. Cooties, I guess. All those years, unable to ever worship at the temple. All those years-- sick, broke, lonely, outcast.

What does Jesus do while he keeps the frantic leader of the synagogue cooling his heels? He takes the time to see the woman, to include her. He even calls her "*daughter*" so that all can hear the blessing. He restores the possibility of being accepted back into society; her healing is more than just physical. It's bold mercy in action. God is about the business of healing and breaking down barriers, and lifting up the hopeless. Jesus then turns and continues on to the home of the synagogue leader, and raises his daughter to life in spite of the derisive laughter of the gathered mourners.

Sometimes our world sets up barriers, modern versions of "*uncleanness*," based on prejudice or stereotype. There's a story of a church in the early steps of integrating its Sunday School. The upstanding pillar of the church went around with a rag, wiping down the chairs which the young black children had sat on. *Only* those chairs and no others. Unclean, you know.

Too often we *judge, discriminate, and exclude* others. Perhaps we defend ourselves from fully seeing our own failings, because we don't really believe in God's promises. Mercy is God's preferred method of dealing with us; mercy is *God's* method of working *through* us as well. Jesus reaches out to us *because* we are sinners; that outreach extends God's love to us, and then *through us* to those around us. Jesus reminds us, "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*" We can get caught up in a consuming drive for perfection, and then put ourselves and others down who don't or can't measure up. This comes from not believing in God's promise of grace and forgiveness. Not remembering that God desires mercy, and not sacrifice.

“What do we need to do in order to be effective for God?” We need to start with the question, *“what is God’s mission?”* Everything that we do, everything that we plan, needs to flow from an awareness that we don’t do this for ourselves, and we don’t do this by ourselves. At the Synod Assembly zoom meeting yesterday, the bishop reminded us that the budget, the constitution, the leaders, the worship, the programs—none of these are an end in themselves. Outside the context of God’s mission of mercy and healing for the world, they are only another type of self-absorbed busyness, another version of modern-day *“sacrifice.”* *We do well to slow down, to watch and wait, to listen and pray for God’s Spirit to guide us.*

God is at work in Jesus, and God’s mission in this world breaks through the barriers we enforce--and God’s grace amazes us, if we pay attention to it. It was amazing that Jesus sought out Matthew, a tax collector. It was even more amazing that Matthew the outcast heard and believed the call that Jesus extended to him, and dropped everything to follow that call.

What if Matthew had come to agree, in his heart of hearts, that he didn’t deserve to be called by Jesus. Even if we think we are not worthy enough for God to call us; and well, *even if everyone else might agree that we are least likely to be called into God’s service, God calls us anyway.*

Even though our love for God may be as passing as the morning fog, or the mist on the lake, that burns off when the heat of noonday comes, God’s love for us, for us sinners, is as sure as the rising of the sun or the changing of the seasons. We see that powerful mercy in Jesus’ death on the cross, and the grace of new life at Easter. God doesn’t love us because *we* are good. God loves us because *God* is good. And merciful, for Jesus’ sake.

God does desire mercy; first of all, for us to receive it and then, to live and share it. The mercy God calls us to *comes out of* God’s mercy in our own lives. And God wants us to live so that it shows. A little girl once asked her Sunday School teacher if God was bigger than we are... The teacher said, *“Yes, dear, God is bigger than we are....”*

Then the little girl asked if God was inside us. The teacher said, *“Yes, God is in everyone.”* *“Well,”* said the little girl, *“If God is inside us and God is bigger than us... wouldn’t God show through?”* Indeed.

Slow down and take the time to look for God showing through the ordinary things of life around you. Look for God’s mission of mercy, and for opportunities to celebrate the God who is *bigger* than any of us, but who wills to work *within* and *through* all of us. We pray for patience and wisdom, and for eyes to see God at work. We ask for hearts opened to God’s compassion and hands extended to offer God’s mercy in a world crying out for it. *That’s what God is up to.*

Our Awesomely Complicated God Genesis 1:1 -2:4a; Matthew 28: 16-20 Trinity Sunday
June 4, 2023

On the church year calendar, this is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost Sunday, the start of the “long green season” of “Sundays after Pentecost.” On this Trinity Sunday, we might ask, “why focus on a *doctrine*, when there is so much anxiety and grief and injustice in our world?” I think today’s lessons can help us consider that question.

The doctrine of the Trinity presents us with a mystery, more to be *worshipped* than *understood*, more to be *experienced* than to be *explained*. The actual word “Trinity” doesn’t appear in the Bible, but there *are* passages that guide our efforts to talk about our experience and understanding of God. Each year, the lessons on Trinity Sunday always lift up sections of the Bible that point to God as *trinity*.

Our First Lesson today is one of the Bible’s accounts of Creation. Here we have the Trinity at work: God as Creator, God as the Word that God speaks—remember how the First Chapter of John’s Gospel introduces Jesus: “*in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*” The Spirit shows up too, brooding and blowing over the waters of *chaos* as the creation begins to take shape.

This “*Genesis chapter one*” account of Creation was put into its current form when the people of Judah had been forced into exile in far-away Babylon, in the sixth century before Christ. This passage encourages a hopeless and battered people who were mired in overwhelming losses, people who were doubting the power of their God as they faced their captors. The mighty Babylonian Empire claimed that *their* gods had triumphed over the god of their captives, and so who was their puny little God anyway? The calm, orderly creation account of Genesis chapter 1 affirmed for the Judeans that *their God* was *indeed* the author of it all, no matter how hopeless they were feeling there, a thousand miles from their home. Their God created with a *simple Word* and not the domineering *bloody sword* of battle. The Babylonians had a creation account. It reflected their ideals of Empire-- it was bloody and it was domineering. A body was chopped up and the earth was made from the body parts. So Genesis is a counter-narrative, if you will. They had a mighty God who called the creation GOOD, again and again. Good, *even in exile*, surrounded by uncertainty and disruption, in the land of their enemies.

Our Creator God cares for us, always eager to blow the Spirit of life into the fearful and fear-filled world, always able to create life out of chaos. Clearly there continues to be a crying need to deal with chaos. Unless your world is a whole lot different than mine. When I look at my life and the world around me, I am comforted by remembering one of the basic laws of physics is that things drift toward *chaos on their own*—but, creating *order*, now that takes intention and intervention.

The last verse of today's Gospel reading—*"I am with you always, to the end of the age"* -- could provide a powerful support for those in Matthew's day, who had been expecting that Jesus would come back very soon, *any day now*. Their faith was being exercised, as the days and weeks and years stretched on, with the day-to-day difficulties of being a faithful follower of Jesus. The promise of God's presence can also sustain *us*, when the increasingly evident legacy of sin and evil can surely eat away at our joy and our hope, when God feels very far away, and maybe *—we wonder—* not much able or interested in making things better. Yet in midst of the death and dying, the cruelty and the chaos, the virus and the violence; and also in the midst of hope for new possibilities for a fairer and more functional future, our awesome God promises to stay with us.

The Gospel passage calls us to baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This lesson is called the Great Commission. It was given in Galilee where Jesus had *begun* his mission, before he *"set his face to Jerusalem."* To Jerusalem, where Jesus would be arrested by the power brokers who were threatened by him, who would not accept his teaching. To Jerusalem, where he would suffer and die unjustly at their hands. *God knows what our suffering feels like.* We can see a reflection of the face of Christ in the burdened faces of modern-day targets of injustice-- those whose names have been spray painted on protest signs, and those whose names will never be known.

At first the mission of Jesus was specifically to the Jews. *Now* the mission is expanding. In the name of the triune God, Jesus sends his disciples out to all the nations; that includes *us*, and people *like us*, and people who are *not like us*. This is God's mission to the world, now entrusted to us. This passage is more than a comforting promise to be with us. It is also challenge to share and dare, and grow and glow with the love of Christ.

The Great Commission starts in our neighborhood. Not everyone has gifts to be a foreign missionary. But we all give witness, *whether we intend to or not*. Let our witness reflect a God who loves no matter what, and shares that love *through* us, as we reflect that God's work in Jesus is our number one priority, and God's command to love God and our neighbor is what shapes our actions.

Jesus instructs us to teach all nations. We do not all have the gift to be teachers--although we teach our children, our friends, our neighbors, and co-workers by our example, whether we intend to or not. But even more, every one of us is called to be learner. We don't ever "graduate" from learning about God. *How might you help each other teach and learn about God's work in and among us?*

So, it's Trinity Sunday. Why bother with the Trinity, anyway? Well, the teaching of the Trinity can help us to check out the scope of our spiritual connection to God. Many Christians confess the Trinity, but really only connect with one aspect of God. Many folks believe in God and look for God at work in this world; but *what kind of God* are they looking for? Is it the kind of God we find in Jesus? Is God just a piece of a religious ideology, or do we see a Spirit actively at work transforming people's lives, adapting to new challenges, and bringing people together to worship and work for God's purposes?

So also, many Christians have a “Jesus only” spirituality. The doctrine of the Trinity encourages us to open up, to also seek God at work in the Spirit throughout time and among all people, and to care for the earth which God has created and has entrusted to us, that “good” earth.

So also, there are Christians so focused on gifts of the Spirit that they can lose the big picture. Remembering that God is Trinity can help keep God’s love in Jesus at the center of our spiritual life, and not our own spiritual energy and experiences. And it can help keep spirituality focused outward and rooted in the “here and now” created world.

Jesus says “*Make disciples of all nations.*” The first disciples, still sorting out the amazement of Easter, worship God, *even*, the text tells us, as they deal with their doubts. Jesus tells them to go bring people into the community of the Trinity – to baptize. The very ones who “forsook him and fled,” Jesus now calls to teach the nations what Jesus had showed them about God’s love. Where will they get the strength for this? Well, where would *any of us* get it? Perhaps someone should have told Jesus to “*get real.*”

Yet Jesus says to them, and to us, “*all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,*” and “*Lo, I am with you always,* to the close of the age.” That authority in the presence of Jesus is what we are given. We bear the promise of our Baptism, God’s own beloved children marked with the cross of Christ forever.

In the Eastern Orthodox churches, there is a famous icon –or sacred image – designed for meditation on the Trinity. The Holy Three are gathered around the table, the table of communion, and there is an opening at the table. It is not a closed circle. God makes room in that empty space for the new, for “all nations.” *We* are invited into the love and awesome mystery of *this* God. This is what we were *created* to share. This is what the Spirit empowers us to share. It is the love and life through which we are sent into the world to share the Good News of Jesus, crucified and risen for the life of the world. It is the awesome love and life that sustains and blesses us on our journey. So as our second lesson puts it, using those familiar words of Trinitarian blessing: *may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

In this busy season of endings and beginnings, in today's reading from Acts, we hear the remarkable Pentecost story of the birthday of the church. A new vision has flashed onto the screen, a new sound fills the room—and nothing will ever be the same. What happened to those gathered followers of Jesus on that Pentecost morning still shapes our lives as Christians today.

If someone were to ask you, “*when was your church founded?*” you could answer, 100 years ago next year. But the underlying answer is not found in the archive files. Today, we celebrate the Holy Spirit firing up the followers of Jesus, and sending us out with the good news of God's love. You've maybe heard the saying, “*All dressed up and no place to go.*” Well, at Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the people *were* all fired up and had someplace to go. To go out, to share the fire of God's love. That sharing of the good news now continues through us.

If Luke had interviewed a witness to that remarkable day, perhaps he would have heard this: “Well it was about 50 days after Passover. We were in Jerusalem, for Pentecost, the harvest festival. We were all gathered together: we didn't know what would come next or where we would be heading. We had listened to Jesus teach us for 3 years, but now Jesus wasn't present in person anymore, and we were just kind of stuck on pause, waiting together behind those closed doors, as Jesus had told us to do.

Then, suddenly *something happened* in that room, something that really stunned us. The Spirit of God came blowing and blazing into the room and into our lives. And, you know, something came over Peter. He had still been ashamed of running out on Jesus, but Peter suddenly found his tongue again, and did he *ever* have something to say! As Peter often did. Soon we found ourselves sharing the message of Jesus throughout Jerusalem and beyond; we just couldn't keep silent. And people heard us, and they came to find out more . . .” And the story went on.

The roots of the festival of Pentecost are Jewish. Their tradition said that on Pentecost, the Law was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This festival, fifty days after Passover, was one of the “*pilgrimage festivals*” in which male Jews from many nations were obliged to go to the temple in Jerusalem-- which, incidentally, is why Jerusalem's usual population of 20 - 30,000 exploded to several hundred thousand during the festivals. The rowdy, crowded streets were filled with faithful Jews from all of those hard to pronounce places. I always feel for the readers on Pentecost Sunday. And the followers of Jesus were crowded into a room, doors shut, watching and waiting.

What happened there on that remarkable day? Did they begin to speak in all the various dialects of the many visitors to Jerusalem from all those many places, so the miracle was the disciples speaking languages that they had not learned? Or was the miracle in the hearing, each one understanding that “speaking in their own tongues,” with the effect of a United Nations simultaneous translation for all the people who heard and understood--without benefit of headsets, modern electronics, or multi-lingual translators? We don't know for sure. It could have been some combination of the two.

One amazing miracle was the transformation of the people--Peter who, not much more than a month before, had *three times* denied Jesus, now Peter's all fired up; hear him preach boldly to some of the very people from whom he had been hiding, afraid to admit he even knew Jesus. Truly it was a miracle that the followers of Jesus, holed up behind closed doors, had now broken loose into the world. On the birthday cake of the Christian church, they were a crowd of candles, each one on fire for Jesus.

The people who heard his preaching on Pentecost asked Peter: "what does all of this mean?" Well, he could have reminded them that the word for Spirit, in both Hebrew and in Greek, can also be translated *wind*, the wind that had roared into that room and filled it. He could have pointed them back to the "*Genesis Chapter One*" celebration of that very Spirit of God, blowing over the chaos, as our Psalm reminded us today, breathing life into creation. He also didn't remind people that Moses encountered God in the fire of the flaming bush, and again in the wind and fire on Mount Sinai when Moses received the Law from God. The wind and fire of God's Spirit filled the room on that Pentecost day.

Peter did not even dwell on the jolt of new energy that had filled the room, or the miracle of the speaking and understanding--the reversal of the Tower of Babel--or the fire of the faith of all those who had received this new Spirit power. *No*. Here's what Peter does. Peter *tells the story*. He tells the story of the mighty works of God. And the mightiest work and Word of God is Jesus himself, how he lived, and allowed himself to suffer, one with all who suffer, who even submitted to a criminal's cruel death. Peter tells the amazing story of how God brought Jesus to life on the other side of death. The mightiest power of God is this simple promise: You can trust me because of Jesus. See how much I love you. It is for you that Jesus lived and died, and his resurrection is the promise of life for you.

In the Creed, we say together that we believe in the Holy Spirit. Today as we welcome Bonnie as a new member, we will say that creed in its original form in a question and answer format. So, what does the Holy Spirit do? in his Catechism. In his explanation of the third part of our creed, Martin Luther wrote that the Holy Spirit "*Calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the church*"-- gathers us together into one; one body with many different parts and many varied gifts.

A writer named Dan Olson notes that, "The church is *not* a community of the like-minded. There are plenty of those around in the world out there. We surely wouldn't need the Holy Spirit or the miracle of Pentecost to merely be a community of the like-minded. We are not a collection of individuals who just *happen* to have 'Jesus in their hearts.' We are a body together in Christ, expressing to the world the heart of Christ." The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see the light of God's love in the person of Jesus. The Spirit lights us up -- gathers us together here in worship and praise, equips us for service and sends us out to our neighbors and the world.

Jesus gives us work to do, but we are not left alone. Jesus promises to send us an Advocate. An Advocate is one who stands with us, as an attorney in a courtroom stands alongside the defendant. The Spirit is one who stands alongside us as we attempt to pray; who even prays *for us*, when we do not know what we need, and haven't the foggiest about how to pray for it. The Spirit helps us to see new things that are emerging on the horizon; the Spirit is the one who gives us patience, and guides us on pathways as yet unknown. The Spirit is the one who fires us up, as a blazing torch, or perhaps more often as the quiet, steady flame of a pilot light.

We often use the dove as a symbol for the Holy Spirit. We see that image in the Biblical story of the baptism of Jesus, when the Spirit appears in the form of a dove. Now, doves are calm and peaceful birds, but the Spirit of God also has another side. Celtic Christians – the Irish and their kin -- chose the wild goose as a symbol representing the Holy Spirit. When you get all fired up by God's Spirit, sometimes you get surprised by the place where you end up going. Sometimes when there's a wild goose chase, the *goose* is chasing *you*, pushing you into places that are surprising and challenging. Places that bless in ways that we sometimes need the Spirit to help us understand.

The world is hungry and thirsty for the good news that we have to share. And like the followers of Jesus on that Pentecost day, we too are given the message of God's transforming love and forgiveness. And we are sent out with gifts and the power to share that good news. The Spirit gives us the fire, and a place—*our neighbors around us*—to share it. We are all fired up, and we have places to go.

The question is not really “*Do I have the Spirit?*” This you have received from God, in the promises of Baptism, when you hear God's Word preached, when you pray, when you gather together at the Lord's Table--God promises to be here and God makes good on promises. When we remember and affirm our baptism vows, what a blessing we have to draw on! “Stir up the gift of your Holy Spirit; confirm our faith, guide our lives, empower us in serving, give patience in suffering, and bring us to eternal life.”

This gift of God's Holy Spirit is still poured out on us. The question is not, do I *have* the Spirit, the question is, what shall I *do* with this gift? How shall we together enact our love for Jesus, here and now, in this place? The specific strategies for how we respond to the love of Jesus require seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. What we do with the fire of the Spirit may require some waiting, as you are doing now in the call process. We can trust the fire of the Spirit, for the Holy Spirit shows us how to love Jesus and share that love. We pray: help and guide us, O God, to see and share your fire.

On this last Sunday of the Easter season, our Gospel reading speaks to a time of waiting and watching for new directions. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared in person to various witnesses over a period of 40 days. But now things have changed for these witnesses of the risen Christ. Yes, Jesus had promised his followers the gift of Holy Spirit, which they did receive on Pentecost, 50 days after Easter. We celebrate that birthday of the church next week. In the meantime, it's about waiting and watching.

In the meantime, the waiting and watching ones have this prayer of Jesus. Although in John's Gospel, Jesus prays this *before* his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, please note that Jesus is also praying for *us* here and now; he prays "*on behalf of those who have been given to him,*" that we stay connected to God through our connection to Jesus. Eternal life, Jesus says, is this: that we know God, and live in unity with Jesus. And this unity isn't just a personal "*me and Jesus*" thing. Jesus also prays that we be one *with each other*, even as we are one in our relationship with God.

In our battle-wearied world, we continue to need this prayer of Jesus for unity. We might imagine that this thing called "*the World Wide Web*" would have the capacity to bring us all together. Hm. But, ironically, aided by that very Web, we live in a world increasingly fractured and splintered – suffering an epidemic of loneliness-- a thousand different channels out there. So many people are barricaded off on their own bandwidth-- trolling, not talking. And that, of course, can get very ugly, as we see all too often around us. It cuts us off from each other, and the anger and anxiety crowd out creative and caring solutions that God wants us to work out together to address the pressing problems that surround us.

What kind of "oneness" does Jesus have in mind here? A unity fed by fear and force? The Nazis' symbol of oneness was a bunch of twigs bound together into an unbreakable bundle, enforcing a rigid unity where anyone who breaks rank is shunned and shamed – or worse. *This is not* the oneness that God wants for us. The oneness that comes from God will not be imposed and enforced by *the power of the sword*, but implanted and nurtured by the *power of the Spirit*. God will continue to be at work through those who, as the baptized children of God, have been "*marked by the cross of Christ forever.*"

When the apostle Paul encouraged unity between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, men and women, young and old, he used the image of the Body of Christ. Jesus continues to be present to the world in that baptized Body, which has many differing members, hands and feet and eyes and ears. We are one *in that Body*; Jesus tells us this oneness is like the unity that he has with the Father. That's almost impossible to even imagine, but you know, Jesus says it. *How do we celebrate our diversity, even while we live out our unity?* It is unrealistic, and actually not all that helpful, to expect everyone to agree about everything. Christians often have legitimate, honest disagreements and different opinions. And that's OK. But in loving others as we ourselves have been loved by God, we can care about one another even when we don't agree about some of that stuff out there. Even when fears and anger and hurt make that difficult, taking the risk to reach out in love beyond our differences can bear witness to the unbounded love of God.

We can go beyond just reluctantly tolerating our differences. Jesus envisions us, together in *all* our messy diversity, as a *reflection of God's glory*. Really, Jesus? Yet, think of the glory of a well-cut diamond. The master creates many facets, and grinds and polishes each one. All are part of one whole, but each separate side has a purpose; the different facets are part of a glorious master plan. Together, they sparkle gloriously in the light. Or like those puzzle pieces of a jigsaw puzzle from last week. Each piece is unique, yet all are necessary for the picture.

Amazingly, Jesus is glorified in us, as we live out our love for God, for each other, and for the people and communities around us. Jesus wants us to have the love that he has received from the Father. The message and mission of Jesus is what unites us. It is a unity found most powerfully at the foot of the cross. Self-giving love, vulnerable, suffering – doesn't seem very glorious to our usual way of thinking. Easter, yes – but Good Friday? The glory given to Christ is hidden *in the cross*; we begin to see it at Easter; and it continues through the Holy Spirit in us, the Body of Christ gathered here and now.

Think of this image for the *oneness of self-giving love*: embers on a Weber Grill. Those coals spend themselves in their mission; gathered glowing together in oneness, they are able to give off heat and warmth, so the food cooks and the marshmallows toast. When the embers are scattered, they grow cold. United through the Christ of the cross and the empty tomb, we can radiate God's good-news glory of love in action for the sake of the world that God loves.

We can bring to mind role models for this love in action. A few months after Dr. Albert “Pete” Pero Jr. died, the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago—where he had taught for many years—published some tributes to Pete, who was the first African-American faculty member at a North American Lutheran seminary. About 30 years ago when I was serving a parish in Detroit, I participated in a group he put together to study cross-cultural ministry.

Dr. Pero challenged us to “Live into the truth of the gospel: that we are one in Christ through our baptism.” Or, as Pete liked to say, “*water is thicker than blood*.” He taught us that ethnicity, social class, skin color, gender, nationality, and the like are our *identifications*, not our *identity*. When we mistakenly root our core identity in our identifications, this divides us. *But our true identity is as baptized children of God. Our baptismal identity gets lived out through our identifications, and one identification is not superior to another in God's eyes.*

Having received our unity through being part of the Body of Christ, we can celebrate our marvelous diversity. When our relationship to God is what anchors our lives, our priorities change. When we live out our baptismal identity, our lives show it. God calls us to respond to possibilities for being God's agents of transformation. Jesus prays, “*keep them in your name*.” We are given the name above all names. We carry the name of Jesus, forever, once we have received it at our baptism.

Each generation faces its own challenge – its own calling -- to find ways to nurture the wholeness and the love God intended us to experience. The first disciples were asked to go to the ends of the earth, to face the unknown, to risk death and persecution to witness to the message of God's new life in Christ. We have our own challenges to work together for the benefit of our neighbor. Like the disciples we can feel like we don't know where to start. But God's messengers say to us, as they did to the disciples, "*don't just stand there looking into heaven—watch actively and wait patiently for God's Spirit to lead you, and fill you up, and put love into action through you.*" God isn't done yet.

If you thought Easter was the start of something big, just wait until it breaks loose with the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, until the church is pushed out into the world to be God's agents of transformation right here! After Good Friday we waited, stunned and broken. Now, after the Ascension of Jesus, we wait, stunned but made bold by the promise of the Spirit. We wait, praying as Jesus prayed for us, praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, praying for the power of Pentecost. And that Holy Spirit continues to call, gather, enlighten, and empower the many parts of the Body in our calling to make Christ known. Our many gifts and assets are diverse, and they are all valuable and necessary in our one mission: united in Christ, living in love, that the world might believe and live.

God's Puzzle Pieces Acts 17: 22-31; John 14: 15-21 Easter 6 May 14, 2023

So today, we can ask the question: “Where can we find God in this world?” The disciples ask this question, gathered with Jesus as he is bidding farewell to them. Paul’s audience in Athens wondered about God too. They could see the grand temples to their many gods, near the bustling marketplaces of that great cosmopolitan city. Whether simple fishermen, two thousand years ago, in an obscure province at the edge of the Roman Empire, or the cultured University debaters in ancient Athens--or you and me, here and now --through the centuries, the question remains: *What about this God thing?*

Paul tells his hearers that they were created to search after God. Someone has said that humans are created with a God-shaped hole in our soul, and we spend our lives seeking to fill it, one way or another. The word that Paul uses—to “*feel after God*,” is the image of a blind person, groping in the darkness to find the way. Paul invites us into the light. God wants to be found, so in the midst of our groping – we can “let go and let God” grab hold of us wherever we are.

So, where exactly is this God to be found? Jesus addresses this question as he prepares his disciples for his going away. That’s the context for the words today. Jesus tells us the world does not see or know God’s presence. Yet Jesus promises that those who believe in him will see God with new eyes. There will be a *new picture* of God’s presence, even though the followers of Jesus will no longer see him in person. How will the pieces of this new picture of God fit together?

I like doing jigsaw puzzles. I get a couple each day that pop up online, but they’re not as satisfying as the ones that come from the box with the picture on the cover, and get spread out on a big table. I’m making progress on a 1,000 piece one these days. I prefer the new ones, or those I had put back in the box the last time --because I know all the pieces are there. Although I did do one that had two extra pieces in it. I have no idea how that happened.

Jigsaw puzzles can tell us a lot about spiritual life. One thing I’ve already mentioned. You want to trust that all the pieces are there. Sometimes you just can’t seem to find that *one piece* that finishes the outside edge, or that completes a distinctive section of the picture. When you suspect that a piece might be missing, well, you know you think *that must be the one* that you have been looking for and not finding. Then maybe you stop looking for it--even if it is really sitting right under your nose, just waiting to be found.

The message of Jesus can be like the picture on the puzzle box. We don’t have it together yet, but that *picture on the box* serves as a guide. So I pick up a piece of my life, and try to imagine where in that “Jesus-picture on the box” it might fit. Often, I have to be patient and put it down, until later. Yet I trust that in time, the piece will fit.

And, finally, all the pieces are vital to the whole picture. There may be some—the edge pieces, or the line where the sky meets the landscape, or the red barn pieces—that can help you get going and keep going, but the picture really isn’t complete, it isn’t entirely satisfying, without *all* the pieces. The different-ness of each piece is not a problem--it’s what makes the puzzle what it is. They fit together--they are made to fit together.

God's people are like a human jigsaw puzzle. Jesus was giving the disciples a new "*picture on the box*" to help them "grope after" God (as Paul preached about in our first lesson). They would need a new vision after Jesus was no longer present with them in person. *We* are in the same boat as those disciples after Jesus went away from them--for when we want to see Jesus, we must put on our "Jesus glasses" and do our seeing with eyes of faith now too.

We are also like the human jigsaw puzzle in that we are many pieces spread out on the table, and it is not at *all* clear how we fit together sometimes. Each of us individually has many pieces of our lives that are a puzzle to fit together for ourselves, *but there's more to it than that*. Each individual is a piece of a new whole, which God wishes to fit together into a vital picture of Jesus--the *Body of Christ*, the people of God gathered and fitted together by the Spirit of God.

In some ways, we are *not like* the colorful little cardboard pieces spread out on the dining room table, because none of them can refuse to be what they are. They can't hide their own distinctive colors (although it might seem like they do, sometimes); they can't refuse to reach out to connect or be available to receive another piece.

We, however, can do *all* these things. We can even go out looking for a different table, and try to fit ourselves into a different picture. We can even get ourselves lost for a while, like when I'd get finished with a puzzle except for a piece or two, which I'd hunt for under the table, or behind the door, until I found it. God has given each of us gifts and talents, and we each carry our burdens and joys. Each piece, each person, each gift, each burden, and each joy will help to complete God's puzzle picture.

Here's another example of pieces that, together, make the whole picture. Maybe you have seen shots on TV of a stadium during half-time. The camera starts by showing a sea of random blips of color, but soon a picture begins to emerge. Each person in a section of the stadium has a card, and as each one holds up that card, everyone who looks can begin to see the picture emerge.

Seeing the picture on the puzzle box or the pattern in the stadium cards on the TV screen is generally a whole lot clearer than seeing God's plan in our lives. That's the rub. You see, not many of the citizens of Athens bought what Paul was preaching. It was just another interesting debate, but it didn't open their eyes and their hearts to the presence and promise of Jesus. Maybe they were just too attached to all the other things and ideas that filled up their time and grabbed their best energy. We are all drawn to those substitute gods that compete for our attention.

Jesus was preparing his followers to face the feeling of being abandoned. That is, of course a difficult feeling. Sometimes we miss God's picture because our losses that we can see and must feel are more real to us than the promises which we must trust in and hope for. That just is the case, sometimes.

Yet Jesus promises, "*I will not leave you orphaned.*" I will not abandon you on the doorstep like some throw-away infant. You won't be "Home Alone" kids. I will send you my Spirit, the Comforter. In ways that will often not be evident at the time, I will be there working within you and among you all—and that word "you" in the text is plural-- putting the pieces together,

showing new visions of the picture. In ways that *surprise* you, I am there in the midst of my people. I will be there in ways that may even *scandalize* you—as Paul’s preaching of the resurrection of a body turned his Athenian audience away. They thought the spirit was everything, why would you bother with the body? That’s what they were trying to get beyond. The Holy Spirit will give you Jesus glasses, and you will see that picture of God’s love in your midst.

Seeing Jesus on the spiritual puzzle box shows us that *believing* gives us more than *knowing*, and *hoping* is more powerful than *holding*. Seeing Jesus as the pattern for the pieces our life can remind us that resurrection has broken the powerful stranglehold of death, in spite of so much disturbing and depressing evidence to the contrary.

We are not left “home alone,” even though there are times when we could join in singing the old spiritual “*sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from my home.*” It is a side-effect of being human, this feeling of loneliness and separation. On this Mother’s Day, let us celebrate that Jesus has not left us like motherless children, but has given us the Holy Spirit to comfort and dwell in us. The Spirit nurtures us like a mother tends her children-- builds community, urges us toward a life that causes others to *ask us about where we get our hope.*

The Spirit of God, standing alongside us, puts us puzzled pieces together into the Body of Christ--so that others can see and experience the picture on that puzzle box, the blessings of God at work through us. The *pieces become the peace of God*, and the picture reflects new creation from chaos, new life from death. We can trust the promise that God’s Spirit is placing us into the big picture—and helping us see a picture of a loving God in our world, in the everyday life of trust and faithfulness to the way of Jesus. So we pray: Lord, help us to see you and share your life, so that in our lives, others may see you and know your love.

Jesus: Foundation and Guide I Peter 2: 2-10; John 14:1-14 Easter 5A May 7, 2023

When I lived in St. Louis, I was able to visit the amazing landmark Arch a couple of times. In the visitor center, they show a film featuring the process of building of the Arch; it was quite an engineering feat. Slowly the Arch took shape, until the final day when the two legs of the arch would be joined. Water was sprayed on the one leg warmed by the morning sun to cool it so that it would be the same temperature as the other leg. Everything had to be exactly perfect to get that last section into place. The piece in the center is the most important, for it holds the whole Arch up, so thousands of tourists can safely look out over the city from the very top. Even when the wind blows and the Arch sways, the keystone continues to hold everything together.

In our second lesson for today, Peter quotes the prophet Isaiah, using a word that can be translated cornerstone, like for the foundation of a building, or keystone, like that last crucial link atop the Arch.

According to a Jewish legend, when the temple of Solomon was being constructed, all the stones sent up from the quarry were practically the same size and shape. But one day a stone was found that was different from all the rest, and the builders said, "*There must be some mistake.*" So, they tumbled it down into the valley of Kidron below the Temple area. As the years went on, they were finally ready to set the cornerstone; so, they sent down the order for it. The quarry worker told them, "You must have it there; we sent it to you *long ago.*" So, they searched, but they couldn't find it.

And then an old workman piped up, "I remember now. There *was* a stone different from the rest and we thought there was no place for it so we tumbled it down into the valley."

So, they went down to the valley of Kidron and there they found the stone, now covered by moss and debris, the very stone that the builders rejected. So now they had to hoist it to the top of the cliff, to put it into place. The stone the builders rejected had become the cornerstone.

Peter's listeners probably knew that story and what he meant when he said, "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by the builders; he has become the cornerstone." Jesus was God's chosen one, but though he was crucified, God has raised him up from the dead. Now he has become the *chief cornerstone* of the new kind of temple that God is building. Peter reminds us that Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, where each one of us is a stone. Jesus Christ is what holds us all together.

And unless Christ is your cornerstone, he may become the stumbling block. There's a lot of stumbling going on these days. Just tune into cable news or talk radio or check your Smartphone. We're seeing an erosion of hope, a shrinking of love at best down to a more manageable size, a meanness of spirit that eats away at the abundant life Jesus promises. The disciples in today's gospel text were about to have their foundations rattled. Jesus says: *Let not your hearts be troubled.* Well, the disciples had plenty to be anxious about--in today's lesson, Jesus is talking about going away; he's talking about suffering and dying, and they for sure don't understand it. Jesus sees their distress, and he speaks to it: *Let not your hearts be troubled.*

Don't be anxious -- *you know the Way*, Jesus tells the disciples. And Thomas -- wouldn't you know it would be Thomas, who always wanted to have his hands on all the details -- Thomas has the courage to ask what they all were wondering. Uh, *Where?* He wants to have turn by turn directions from his GPS. "How can we know the way when we don't know *where* you are going?" For the E-Connect process, I'm reading a book titled "How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going." So, it's still a good question.

Professor Gerhard Frost of Luther College used to tell this story:

"Imagine you are walking through your neighborhood and you pass a house where the family is loading the car to go on vacation. There were three children all under the age of 5 in the minivan waiting eagerly for Mom and Dad to finish the last minute details.

You walk up to the minivan, you poke your head in the window and ask: "Where are you going?" They don't know. "What highway are you taking?" Wide-eyed, they say they have no idea "Where are you going to have supper tonight?" Again, no idea. Then you ask: "With whom are you going?" Their eyes brighten, "with Daddy and Mommy, of course!!" They can answer that!!

They didn't know exactly where they were going, they didn't know the way, they didn't know where they would eat or sleep; but *with whom* they were going-- that they knew. That was all that mattered. They were going with Mommy and Daddy, and Mommy and Daddy would take care of them, would provide for them would bring them to their final destination.

We travel the road of life and we don't know way that lies ahead, we don't know all the turns and curves along the way, but the one thing we know is that *Jesus is guiding us*.

"Believe in God, believe also in me. . . I go to prepare a place for you;. . . You know the Way, because *you know me*. I am the way." We don't simply follow directions. We follow Jesus. In a "Do it yourself" world, we can easily begin to think *we* need to build our own spiritual houses. And God help you if don't do it right, you know? Note the text says "*be yourselves* built into a spiritual house." That's the passive verb tense. God is acting in and through us. It is God who makes us into the living stones of God's dwelling place; those promises flow over us when we are baptized, and are renewed again and again as we *hear* them, and *taste* them, and *share* them with each other, as we have gathered here today to do.

Luther's explanation to the third article of the Creed says that "*we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him.*" But the Holy Spirit invites us to follow a new road, speaks to us through the promises of the Good News that Jesus is God's own chosen one. His *death* and the great amazing surprise, his *resurrection*, is God's road to reach us even when we wander away. The Spirit reaches out to us, each in our own unique way-- gathers us in, opens our eyes and hearts as we take the opportunity to grow in knowledge and wisdom through hearing the Word, through learning together, praying with and for each other, and in serving our neighbors. The Holy Spirit encourages us to keep on growing in our calling to be God's own people. The Spirit is our GPS guiding us on our spiritual way, and always lifting up and linking

us with Jesus Christ.

Eight years ago, I was able to travel to the Holy Land with a small group from the Evansville area. We saw an ancient little house very near a 3rd century synagogue in Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee. The walls of the house were built of small stones. No mortar kept those stones together. The tour guide said these were “*living stones*”--they were rubbed together until they fit together perfectly. Hmm.

Traveling together on that uncharted way of the cross can wear on each of us living stones too. But maybe this friction isn’t just being “*rubbed the wrong way*.” It can be an opportunity to encounter real love and community in Christ, as we are shaped to fit together in God’s plan. Jesus invites us to trust that our relationship with him is the way to travel into an unknown and often unsettling future.

Following the way of Christ, we can be part of those who “*turn the world upside down*,” who do even greater works than Jesus--greater because they are no longer confined to *one place and time*, but extend through *all* the times and in *all* the places where God’s people are placed. The Spirit of our Lord works in and through each of us, and we too are called to be God’s own people--*called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light*. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Suffering and the Abundant Life Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10: 1-10 April 30, 2023

Jesus makes a bold and wonderful promise in our Gospel text for today. “*I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.*” So, how do we have this “*life abundant*” in the midst of all the suffering in our world? What guidance does the voice of our Good Shepherd give us when we “*walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death?*”

Our second lesson today talks about suffering. This particular section of I Peter is addressed to *slaves*, who, at that time this was written, were considered property, with no legal rights whatsoever. Even the idea that a slave COULD claim to “suffer *unjustly*” at the hands of his or her owner went against the culture of that time, for owners had the right to do *whatever they wanted* to their slaves, without accountability. Many of the early Christians were enslaved, and at that time, it was simply not possible to get beyond the customs and laws about slavery. So, today’s lesson is practical pastoral advice on how to live a Christian life as an *enslaved* person, in a situation where your owner is abusing you.

Now, please note: The Bible is *not* saying here that God *approves* of slavery as an institution, although this and other passages like it have been used in the past to defend it. To attempt to overthrow the institution of slavery in New Testament times would have simply exposed the Christian slaves to swift and brutal punishment, and the early Church to the wrath of the Roman Empire. Even so, a glimpse of “*life abundant*” does break through. For the slave to endure a slave’s suffering, not as a lesser being who deserves no better (which was the popular belief), but as *Christ’s own brothers and sisters* who follow in His footsteps, and (owners please take note) have *God watching over them*—this maybe was a social justice breakthrough for that time, a creative and dignified way to deal with their suffering.

What about suffering now? There’s certainly plenty of it. How do Christians in our day follow the example of Jesus when it comes to suffering? We may be called on to *resist* oppression that causes unjust suffering, to support God’s will for justice and wholeness for the entire community. We have seen examples of this in the *resistance to Hitler* waged by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the underground *Confessing Church* in Germany, in the *civil rights marches* of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent resistance as he worked to *free India* from colonial Great Britain, or in Nelson Mandela and his party fighting the injustices of *apartheid* segregation in South Africa.

The Powers that control through fear, well they get confused by actions of those who, unafraid, pour themselves out in selfless servanthood. Who choose to play the game by different rules. Who do not turn away from risking their own cross. When we resist injustice, we may choose to risk our own suffering *for the sake of* reducing the suffering of OTHERS. Well, and at the very least, as citizens of a democracy, we can try to make changes happen that the occupied peoples in the Roman Empire could never have attempted or even thought about.

What about the suffering we encounter when we ourselves are the target? We *may* be called on to do what we *can* to protect ourselves, creatively, nonviolently. To claim one's own value and worth before God by refusing to be victimized anymore takes, at the very least, great *spiritual* courage and often courage of other sorts as well.

It is necessary, in each situation of suffering, to discover what the options are: Are we called to actively resist the causes of oppression, risking our own suffering, if need be, for the other person's sake? Or will we resist oppression by refusing to be victimized-ourselves and make changes that could bring us to "greener pastures?" Or must we just endure it, trusting that God will shepherd us through the dark valleys?

This last option—enduring-- is what the second lesson is talking about today; but that's not the *only* option that Jesus modeled for us. He also overthrew the money changers in the temple and he did the *work* of healing even though it was the Sabbath -- examples of active resistance to oppressive practices. And *Jesus* refuses to be pointlessly victimized-- he will not be lured into verbal traps and, because he knows his time has not yet come, he walks away through the frenzied crowd that was prepared to throw him over the cliff. Jesus knew that, when his hour finally did come, his suffering could be redemptive.

In the early years after I was ordained, while I was waiting for a parish call (that paid money), one of my jobs was being an advocate in a battered women's shelter in Minneapolis. Some of the women who worked there had not had good experiences with pastors who told the shelter residents that it was their *Christian duty* to return home and simply submit to their husbands. One co-worker even asked me how I could, as an ordained pastor, *claim* that I was there to actually help the women. She said that.

Someone who has been enduring a relationship where there is violence is NOT being told by today's second lesson to simply endure this suffering "*as their Christian duty*." The suffering that an abusive partner inflicts often escalates over time if allowed to continue. It will not be redemptive in a relationship. Saying no is a first step, even if it is a *no* that begins to take shape within the person before it is expressed. There are options that one suffering abuse can pursue, making plans for safety, physically leaving if needed and possible, or even perhaps trying to legally remove the abuser. These actions will not only honor the value of the target's own God-given life and that of any children involved, but *may* even help the violent partner overcome the violence. These steps can help to make a way for the "abundant life" that today's Gospel reading promises. And in any case, we must remind ourselves that our suffering does not save us—*Jesus already did that for us*.

The kind of suffering we are called to endure should have the potential to be a *witness to the light, and not simply add to the darkness, when we can make a choice*. When such suffering must simply be endured, God wills for it to be innocent, trusting and patient. The power for enduring in this way comes from having been made *one* with the Christ who suffered innocently and patiently *for us* on a cross, thoroughly trusting God to work through it to save us. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives, God makes us a part of the abundant life of this Christ, the promised life, the Easter presence and power of new life and love in the world.

This endurance of suffering can be very powerful indeed. A Professor Roger Johnson of Wellesley College in Massachusetts tells of the remarkable growth of the Chinese Christian Church. A principal reason for that growth, he discovered on his visits to China, was the impression made upon the vast non-Christian Chinese public by the way Chinese Christians bore up under persecution during the brutal days of the Cultural Revolution. The Red Guards made sure that the suffering of their victims was quite public, which was what made possible the *public's observance* of their behavior. When the terror subsided, people by the thousands began seeking out the churches that were left, to find out what made those Christians what they were. Many stayed on to become Christians themselves.

This is the day that we call “*Good Shepherd*” Sunday. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, leads us; he calls us each by name, and living each day in our baptism, we continue to carry that name which we received into lives of those around us. We know that we can listen for God’s voice, and, empowered by the Spirit, follow God’s lead no matter where our paths take us.

As the familiar psalm for this day reminds us: even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death--we have walking with us the Shepherd, who knows first-hand exactly what all this earthly suffering is about. Even if we do not always have the *answers* we would like, we do have *The Answerer*, the Door into the richly blessed life as *God’s own beloved children*, the life that God wills for each of us. We have the resources for living that abundant life: *prayer*—sharing our gratitude for all of the gifts that God has showered on us, naming our hurts and our joys, listening together for the voice of Jesus, gently speaking our own names. We have the *Word of God* to hear and study, and uncover how God is still shaping the stories of our lives; and we have the *presence of God* in the *faithful and flawed, but always forgiven*, flock of God, gathered at the splendidly-spread family table, present among us in the *bread and wine*, as he promised. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord—now and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.*

On that road to their little town of Emmaus, the two disciples were walking; walking *down* into their old life, but it would never be their old life again. As they made their way home after those terrible days in Jerusalem, they engage the stranger who joined them on their way. They share their grief, their raw lament. That Friday cross, the crucifixion of their Jesus, had spelled the crushing end of all their hopes.

Cleopas and his companion - maybe his wife? – they don’t recognize Jesus. Ever notice that we are much more likely to see what we are looking for? Often, *we don’t recognize Jesus* walking alongside us because *we don’t expect to see him* there. We don’t have our “*Jesus glasses*” on. And sometimes we are looking for someone *else*, perhaps a Jesus who will reinforce our opinions, a Jesus who will reward our good deeds and make sure to punish those *OTHERS* who mess up. Or maybe we are looking for a forceful Jesus, who will overwhelm all our enemies, and guarantee success on our timetable and according to our own plans. Or maybe we have given up looking for anything at all.

Luke says “*their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*” Were they so grieved by their experience, so sure that Jesus was gone that they simply *couldn’t* recognize Jesus? They weren’t looking for this stranger who sought them out, and quietly walked with them in their grief. Their cherished vision of how things were supposed to turn out had been utterly destroyed by the events of that Friday just past, and they had been blinded by their despair, made numb and weary and sad by their loss.

These followers of Jesus were SAD on Easter Day. We who hear the story now-- we know what Cleopas and his unnamed companion in the story do not: “*Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn’t know what’s been going on?*” they ask. They wonder *just where the guy has been*. Who doesn’t know what has been happening in Jerusalem these days? Rumors were everywhere; this sorry Jesus saga went viral, the violence that had happened was the only topic of conversation. It was the only thing you heard about on the news. Of course, *we* can smile, because we know this visitor is the *only one* who truly *does* know what has happened. And as these sad disciples continue their story, they tell Jesus that when their friends went to the tomb, “*Jesus they did not see*” and, here’s another irony-- even as they are speaking, *THEY* do not see Jesus either, walking *right there*, alongside of them.

These travelers do not see Jesus, and they don’t see how God was working through Jesus. They tell their traveling companion how they had anchored their hope in this leader Jesus, “the one who was mighty in word and deed; sure to free us *from* the Romans, but – *see the faces drop, hear the voices break* --he was arrested and executed *by* the Romans, egged on by the religious leaders.”

These dejected disciples felt their hearts sink. *A helpless, humiliated, dead-and-buried Jesus of course could not* be the Messiah. And we hear their exceedingly sad statement: “*BUT* we had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel.” A wearied resignation to life as it had always been after all; a hollow, hopeless battle, a grim return to the wretched same old weary stuff. They were heading back to their same old life, and they didn’t know how they would put the old pieces together again.

Sometimes we too are walking down to Emmaus, that sad place we go when we don’t know what else to do. We head back there because it is the *only place we can imagine*. In recurring grief and loss, we feel numb, or sad, or angry, or perhaps ashamed. God has failed to act in the way that we hoped. The power of death strikes, blow after lamentable blow, and we wait and wonder if this trusting in God is worth it after all.

Along this bleak journey down to Emmaus, Jesus finds us, walks alongside and helps us to understand our history. He helps the transition to a new identity, where we will discover new possibilities. Jesus teaches that it was *necessary* for the Messiah to suffer and die and on the third day rise again. These *sad disciples* probably knew chapter and verse, and could quote them with the best. But they had not yet grasped what God was doing in Jesus. So now Jesus patiently walks alongside to prepare them for a new chapter in their lives.

It is important to look at *what “glasses” we wear when we read the Bible*. Jesus gave these disciples some new lenses; and they began to see what they had been missing. We must read the Bible with lenses that *look for God’s love active through Jesus*--Jesus the suffering, dying, and rising Savior--in order to understand what the Bible truly means for those who walk with Jesus.

Jesus gave these two travelers “*holy heart-burn,*” and their hopes, cold and dead, were rekindled. Hopes are powerful forces in our lives--when they are dashed, a part of us truly dies. But when they are stirred up, things sure look different then, don’t they! Jesus gave the disciples a new and hopeful way of understanding, a way of *trusting the power of life* instead of *surrendering to the forces of death*. On the road, Jesus paved the way for a new journey, laid the groundwork for a new future. It can be a groundwork for us as well.

It’s impossible to “cope without hope.” Coping, primarily, requires being *patient*. Dennis the Menace asks his mother – “*How come patience takes so long?*” Indeed, we could ask that very question, right? Yet, coping means doing what we need to do, not *frenzied by fear* but *focused by love* for our neighbor. The message of Easter is that there is hope; the *worst* thing is never the *last* thing for those who trust Jesus. The assurance that everything will be OK isn’t wishful happy talk. The words come from Jesus, who knows this journey; he came through death to offer new life, and walks with us along the way.

Now Jesus doesn’t reveal himself to Cleopas and his companion right away. He waits. Why does he wait? Jesus isn’t testing, or scolding, or humiliating the grief-consumed couple. He is, *literally*, on the road with them. He is there as they tell him their disappointment and confusion. He does not cut them off. The new life in Jesus finds us, walks alongside of us, *patiently*, whether we recognize it yet or not.

Jesus, guest in their Emmaus house, reverses the roles; he becomes the host at their table. It becomes his table. They *recognize him in the breaking of the bread*, and he vanishes from their sight. Now they rejoice. And we can join them in that. Jesus has promised to be present, and, trusting this, we can better recognize him working in ways that are mysterious and surprising. Wearing our Easter lenses, we *now* see Jesus-- in the stranger at our door, in the hungry and the hopeless, in the one who seeks forgiveness, or in the one who carries bruises, beat up by life, in these we see Jesus. In another member of the Body of Christ, striving however imperfectly to be faithful, we see Jesus. In our own pain and suffering and sadness, we can see Jesus.

Sometimes we are as blind to seeing Jesus as the travelers on that road to Emmaus. But still Jesus reveals himself to us, in the Word taught by Jesus on the road, pointing to the dying and rising one, chosen by God for us. At the Lord's Table and wherever God's people gather together in the name of Christ, Jesus walks alongside.

What these two in their home at Emmaus received from Jesus sent them back up the road, seven *more* miles, now *uphill* and in the *darkness* of the night that had fallen; back to Jerusalem, back to their connection with the men and women of the believing community. Together with the other witnesses of the risen Christ, their sparks mingled to make a great and holy fire. The power of that fire, the one that holds our attention, that sparks our hope, and turns our lives around in repentance and commitment -- this fire still glows in the whole Christian Church on earth, through the Holy Spirit still at work in and through us. As we walk in that power, we can have, through Christ, full confidence in God, who raised him up from the dead and gave him glory, so that our faith and hope are always in God. *Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia.*

When my niece Kristen was a senior in High School, she played the lead, Eliza, in a production of **My Fair Lady**. Eliza sings her frustration to poor love-struck **Freddy**. *Words, Words, Words, Don't Talk of Love...Show me now*. Show me! That's what the disciple Thomas demanded. Show me—maybe *then* I can believe it. For Thomas, **seeing** would be believing. He goes even further: he wants to **finger the evidence**.

Why was it that Thomas doubted? Is he just bravely trying to cope? Before meeting the risen Christ, the disciples are **all afraid**--hiding out behind locked doors. They are each swamped with the **anxieties** of that deadly Friday--*what will become of me now that Jesus is gone?* I wonder if my **fishing boat** will still be there? Will the old man let me work with him again? Or *maybe* it won't be **safe to come out of hiding**. If they *strung our leader* up, will they come for *us* too?

So, Thomas might have been just saying *out loud* what they all held in their *hearts*. Maybe Thomas speaks for **us** as well. Thomas wants evidence. *OK*. But, now, note **which evidence** it *is* that Thomas wants to put his finger on.

The *wounds*--hands, feet, side-- *these* marks make the risen Christ known to Thomas. I believe that these wounds make our risen Lord more fully known to **us** too. Easter tells us that God has said a *final YES* to the one who, on that terrible Friday, had died bloodied and abandoned, nailed to a cross. BUT we also need to remember that this *risen Lord of Easter Sunday* is also precisely **the one with those Friday wounds**, the one who had suffered and died.

Surely Thomas could have asked to see his Lord's **face**, or maybe ask some questions about **events** that only Jesus would have known about. He could have demanded a **miracle**, or asked to hear him teach. But Thomas wants to deal directly with the **evidence of the suffering and death**. He wants to put his finger into those *wounds*.

Isn't it curious that God *raised Jesus from the dead*, but **didn't do away with the nail wounds** in his hands? Was this an *oversight*? No, I don't think so. The power of death is done for, conquered, but the wounds? *They remain*. When Jesus first appeared to the disciples, when Thomas wasn't there, "*he showed them his hands and his side*." **Why? Nobody asked for that**. Jesus was saying, "**Here** is my signature now."

I think Thomas was right on the money when he demanded to see the marks of the **nails** and the **spear**. He understood that the Christ of his faith had to be the very Jesus who was *crucified, dead and buried*. Anything less than that would **gloss over the power of evil in the world** and undercut the importance of that **resurrection**. The ultimate **power of death has been conquered**—but always remember this: **the wounds remain**.

What would *we* look for in Jesus to tell us whether he is for real? Would we look for the greatest teacher of all time, guiding the ones *in the know* to spiritual fulfillment, popularity and prosperity? Would we demand to see amazing **miracles or signs**, like King Herod in the musical “*Jesus Christ Superstar*”? “Hey, Jesus, prove to me that you’re no fool; walk across my swimming pool!”

We **should** be as careful as Thomas when we want to know whether *anyone's* faith and life is truly *Christ-like*. We need to put our finger on the wounds. A person’s religion may be uplifting; it may **reassure them** that they have the unassailable eternal truth. It may **equip a person to live, wise** to the ways of the world. But if the **evidence of tending to the wounds in the world** isn’t there, the power of the Gospel is coming up short.

What might those “*wounds of Jesus*” feel like? There are places in our lives where we have reached the edge, the *cutting* edge. We usually speak of the “cutting edge” as being the *first* or the *best*. But **cutting edges cut**. Michelangelo was asked once how he created all those beautiful marble statues. He replied that he merely *chipped off* all the stone that wasn’t a part of his new creation. I wonder **how the stone block would feel** in the process of being shaped? We have all felt the pain of those *cutting edges* as they chip away, as they carve away our **spiritual cancers**, even when we try to “**stonewall**” God’s **efforts**. What may *feel* to us like a terrible wounding may in fact end up being *the place where God has gone to work, carving out a new space* for spiritual transformation.

We generally try to **hide** our wounds-- from **others**, from **ourselves**, from **God**. But, in the long run, **hiding** doesn’t work very well. *Pride* or *shame* may prompt us to hide our pain from others, but **others may know** more than we think they do, and our hiding merely **cuts off the support** and caring that others would be *blessed* to share with us if we would only let them. We *pay a frightful price* when we hide from **ourselves**, and we **can’t hide from God at all**. (Adam and Eve discovered *that* one already in the Garden of Eden.) God doesn’t *want* us to hide, because although we don’t expect it or deserve it, God’s amazing **grace** takes up residence in the **broken-open heart**. **THERE**, precisely there where our old life has been mortally wounded, we discover that our old well-defended ways *fall short*. We need to trust the promise of God’s abiding love just to make it through the day. That space, where your own **wounds** are, is a room carved out for God, where you have met God in the wilderness and now can make a better **caring connection** with others in *their* wilderness.

Henri Nouwen, a very wise Christian author, wrote a book entitled *The Wounded Healer*. Nouwen knows that the wounds which Thomas insisted on touching have in truth healed Thomas. **After the resurrection, Jesus still carries the marks of his ultimate love for us**, loving even to the point of suffering and death. Those wounds have healed **us all**, and they can inspire the healing process *through us* in this world.

We are invited into an *even greater* faith than Thomas showed--one that can rely on trusting a **promise** and doesn't demand that we "*finger the evidence.*" **No one can pin down a promise.** It pulls us into the future—the results don't exist yet except as a promise of what will be. But the **relationship with the Promiser** does exist now in the present. We can taste it and touch it-- as we are **sustained** by it, as we **join** others who help us to realize that relationship, a powerful faith-connection with God the Promiser.

Along with the disciples in today's lesson, we have received the gift of the **Holy Spirit**, which could not be *fully* given until after the *awful* wounds of **Good Friday** and the *awesome* victory of **Easter**. We can **gather** with others who know the *wounded and victorious* Lord and receive together the assurance of that loving promise for us.

If we are honest with ourselves, we know that sometimes we are not only the **wounded**, but also the **wound-er**. The Holy Spirit empowers the **forgiveness** that we need to receive and give. The wounds of Christ show the depth of God's **love** for us and promise us **peace** with God again. We can remember that the **wounded Christ**, crucified *by* our wounding and for our healing, Jesus who took on the **very worst that human life can inflict**, **THAT** very **Christ** comes to us promising *his own peace*, with his own **power**. He can transform **our wounds** into the places of God's presence and healing power. That peace *calms* the fear that tempts us to lock ourselves up behind closed doors, shutting ourselves out of God's new, transformed future.

The peace of Christ empowers us. When we *wound and* when we *are wounded*, Jesus doesn't **throw us out**. No, *listen*. Here is what he says: "*Peace be with you.*" Let us be like Thomas--if we **must see to believe, then let it always be the wounds of the cross that we demand to be shown**. Those wounds are Jesus' credentials with anyone who has doubts in the midst of pain and fear. What the world calls **weak** is precisely the *power and promise* of God to heal and to make all things new. The wounded and resurrected Jesus walks right through the **walls of fear** that lock us behind closed doors, with this promise: "*Not as the world giveth, give I unto you. My peace I leave with you. Amen.*"

“Go! Do Not Be Afraid”

Matthew 28: 1-10

Easter Sunday April 9, 2023

They had witnessed their beloved Jesus being put in that tomb; Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had seen the stone rolled into place to seal it. Now, after the sabbath, they were heading back to that sad place. They felt the earth quaking. Did they witness the dazzling angel roll away the stone? The guards who were stationed there were terrified, fainting dead away. But the angel tells the women “*Do not be afraid.*” The soldiers may have been like dead men, but Jesus was alive! He was not in the tomb.

After the earthquake and the dazzling light, there’s what I think is an interesting detail – the angel was just calmly sitting on the tomb’s stone, quietly giving the news, the amazing news, that HE IS NOT HERE at the place of burial. Look at the place where he lay (*it was no phantom; the resurrected one was really, really crucified*). Jesus’ resurrection isn’t like anything we can envision. Jesus doesn’t walk out of the tomb into the daylight after the stone is rolled away, you know, like Lazarus did. He isn’t where he HAD been. He’s already gone out ahead.

Gone on ahead, to Galilee. Galilee – home base for his disciples. Their beloved Jesus has been raised from death – AS HE SAID—only now at this moment could they actually begin to see what Jesus meant when he had said this.

Along the way, as they started to do what the angel told them to do, they meet the risen Jesus himself. “Greetings” – kind of an understatement there. Greetings, a simple but startling word. Bowing down to worship, they dare only to take hold of his feet, afraid and yet rejoicing. And again, the message: *do not be afraid. But go!* Go back home – tell “my brothers” that they will see me there.

While listening to a CD of Easter Hymns, I was struck by the audacity of the claims that we make at Easter. This is such enormously big news, good news, if indeed we take it seriously. Can anyone really take in such a massive message? Death is defeated!

It’s a whole lot easier to take Easter as the popular culture presents it. Easter as the cuddly bunny embrace of the new life of Springtime, *with eggs on the side*? It’s been nice here the past few days, but I expect there are some places which aren’t exactly feeling a “*warm embrace*” as the snow is still melting, and flooding their neighborhoods.

We will sing *The Strife Is O’er, The Battle Done* as our Hymn of the Day today. And what is it then that we are singing about? The “*strife*” is over? The “*battle*” done? Just check out talk radio and cable news, click onto the newsfeeds in social media. Some days it takes a real act of faith to tune in. Wars and rumors of wars, short-sighted and mean-spirited power grabs; disasters multiplying, and death seems to always find a way to keep us afraid and alone. The Easter message claims God’s victory over death; these claims of resurrected life are audacious in the face of these kinds of daunting struggles we face.

Maybe I prefer just a little bit of good news—bite-sized: like I didn't catch that bug that has been going around, or my basement didn't flood when it rained hard, or the sun shined and the flowers bloomed and it *didn't* rain really hard, or maybe a friend is growing in her faith, or a family member is grateful for a good outcome from surgery or treatment. Maybe Easter could be grasped more accessibly in smaller doses.

We don't *expect* to see the ultimate victory over all things that defy God and eat away at our joy. Often in our lives, we are *looking for one thing and instead we find something else* entirely. Sounds like when I go to my junk drawer. The Marys in today's Gospel are looking for the dead, and they find—well, something else for sure; something new, something that would transform their lives as it sent them out in a new direction. Something that gave them a way out of being *afraid and alone*.

GO—*He's not here*. Check out the empty tomb – but then GO. The women ran to tell the news, and on the way, in the midst of their mission, Jesus meets and greets them. Go, and when you are sharing that good news, you discover that are not alone.

GO—Jesus is going on ahead of you, *to Galilee*, the ordinary places where we *live*, where we work, where we play. Go, because *that* is where Jesus will meet you, in the ordinary places. Jesus will meet you and you will not be alone.

GO—At the end of his Gospel, Matthew sums up his message: The Great Commission we call it. Go to all nations, passing along the good news, baptizing and making disciples. As you carry out this commission, you will not be alone, for Jesus promises, *Lo, I am with you always*. Where my people gather in my name, they are never alone.

Do Not Be Afraid: The angel says it, and then those words come also from Jesus: Do Not Be Afraid! The two Marys are filled with joy. But Jesus knows that they also need to hear his “*do not be afraid*” to be able to carry out their mission. And so, they do.

Easter means that resurrection joy can take us, fears and all, down the mission road to meet Christ on the way, and to witness to others so they encounter resurrection life too. We have resilient good news. As the writer Fredrick Buechner put it, “*Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.*”

Perhaps we could see Easter in a story that ran in the *Evansville Courier*, about a choking 3 year-old boy who had stopped breathing, in his mother's car right there on the Expressway. The sight of her son's discolored face sent his mother into a panic. She stopped the car and ran into the busy street, screaming and shaking. There she met a woman who she would later call her *angel*. She said, “*This woman just came out of nowhere.*” This woman was a home-care nurse at Deaconess Hospital, trained in Advanced Cardiac Life Support. As the nurse prepared to blow another breath, she thought to herself: “Please, God. Let this one go in.” And then the little boy began to breathe and his blue complexion quickly changed to pink.

The woman who saved the child had, that morning, dropped to knees and prayed for the Lord to work through her. “And boom!” she said. “I never dreamed it would be in the life of a little one.” Before they left, the mother of the child threw her arms around the nurse, thanking her for saving her son’s life. The nurse said, “She told me that God has different people in different places for different reasons. And I told her, *I know*.” Unexpected grace, new life resurrected even at the brink of death.

Do not be afraid, even when the enemies of life are camped out at your gate. It may be just a legend, but the story is told of Easter morning in 1799, when the Austrian citizens of Feldkirch awoke to find their peaceful village besieged by the army of Napoleon. Knowing that the town defenses could not withstand an attack, those in authority hastily called a meeting, to decide if they should hoist the white flag in surrender to the enemy.

The dean of the church rose first and addressed the somber assembly. “This is Easter Day,” he said in a trembling voice. This is the day of our King’s Resurrection. We must have one moment of triumph. Let us at least ring the bells. If the town falls, it falls; but *we must ring the bells of Easter*. So, they did as he advised, and soon, from the church towers, the bells rang out their joyous sound; and the vibrant music reverberated through the valleys and hills of Feldkirch, filling the frosty air with the sounds of joy.

The invaders, massed outside the gate, were confounded. Why should there be such a celebration? Concluding that the Austrian army had arrived during the night to deliver the town, the French broke camp and were in full retreat before the bells of Easter stopped ringing. So, do not be afraid, but trust the promise of God’s care, God’s deliverance, God’s peace and joy. Easter Life. The unexpected.

Resurrection faith does not arise on the basis of evidence; the chief priests and the soldiers had plenty of evidence. Resurrection faith is built on experiencing the presence of the *risen Christ*. Faith is spread by the testimony of those to whom he appeared, those who followed his command to “go” and spread the news. It is sustained even now by his continuing presence among us, granting us his peace, bidding us to *not be afraid*, but to *go connect* with others, at the table, singing together, living and sharing the good news.

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

By the Lord has this been done; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed. Alleluia!

The First Word: "Father, Forgive Them . . ."

Luke 23:32-35

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!"

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We do things we sense may be foolish and harmful, but we really don't comprehend how foolish and harmful our actions may be. So it was on that Good Friday. Did the soldiers really hear what Jesus was saying? They just continue with figuring out who would gain an extra garment on that day. The bystanders— what did they make of it? The powerful scoffed, jabbing a verbal sword through his claim to be Chosen by God.

Jesus prays, "**Father.**" When we are in our worst pain, we can call out to God to help us handle it, as Jesus did. "**Forgive.**" Rather than calling on God to punish the people who were crucifying him, Jesus called out for God to forgive his tormenters. It may be easier to forgive your friends and family. But it is not easy to forgive people who seek to kill you. But that is what Jesus did from the cross.

Father, forgive "**them.**" Jesus refers to all the soldiers who have whipped and nailed him. Jesus refers to all the religious leaders who have falsely accused him. He refers to all the gawkers in the crowd. "Them" refers to all the disciples who ran away.

And that prayer includes you and me. We ask God to forgive us for the things we have done and failed to do, those things that we didn't really comprehend. We too need God's forgiveness.

That day on the cross, even though the crowds below him did not confess or repent or even admit guilt, Jesus called out to God, "**Father, forgive them.**" Jesus' forgiveness and love from the cross was pure **grace**, a gift to people who did not deserve the gift. And so it is with us. The first word of the cross is pure grace for you and me and the world: *Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do.*"

The Second Word: "Today, You Will Be with Me in Paradise."

Luke 23:39-43

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The second word of Jesus from the cross, Jesus said to says the thief nailed up next to him "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

Paradise. We as human beings are all looking and finding paradise, a place of beauty and profound peace, in the presence of God and those we love.

The Bible *begins* with stories about paradise. In the Old Testament, paradise is the Garden of Eden. But...there was also... a...**snake** in paradise, the sneaky, slithering power of evil that tempted Adam and Eve. There was the potential for evil lurking in that paradise garden. There was the tree of good and evil, and the snake.

But the Bible also *ends* with paradise, a **heavenly city** with streets paved with gold and pearly gates. All the people will be praising God. There is no snake in paradise and no tree of the knowledge of good and evil in paradise. Evil has been destroyed and there will be no more pain and no more crying and no more death. And paradise will last forever and ever and ever. So, paradise is found at both ends of the Bible, in Genesis and in Revelation.

In between Genesis and Revelation, we hear Jesus' words from the cross about "paradise today." The thieves crucified with Jesus present two responses to Jesus – one, joining those who use their words to deny Jesus. But the other, taking that leap of faith to trust that Jesus is who he says he is, and can make good on the promise of salvation. "Remember me when you come into your kingly power."

Jesus says "today you will be with me in Paradise." "Today," the promise is now, even in the midst of the suffering and agony and shame. We are included in that promise to be "with me," in the presence of our loving Lord God, in paradise. Tonight, Jesus speaks to you through the centuries: "Today, you will be with me in paradise." A grand promise of God, worthy of our trust.

The Third Word: "Woman, Behold Your Son; Behold Your Mother."

John 19:25b-27

"...Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

The first three statements from the cross reveal an enormous love for others. In all three statements, Jesus is compassionately thinking of others. In this word, he addresses the needs of his mother and his close friend. He simply says to his mother, "Here is your son." He says to John, "Here is your mother."

The three Marys were present at the foot of the cross: Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Clopas. Mary the mother of Jesus was the only person in the Bible who was with Jesus throughout his whole life, cradle to grave, and beyond the grave.

Mary was with Jesus at the foot of the cross. This would have been the most awful and gut wrenching experience of her life, to experience his crucifixion on the cross. The sword that pieced his side could have just as well been thrust through her side.

John is described as the disciple whom Jesus loved. John had a brother, James, and they were in the fishing business. We discover that two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, were all fishermen on the Sea of Galilee and they were Jesus' first disciples.

Jesus cared for his mother by entrusting her future to John, the only disciple who stayed with Jesus when he was being crucified. Jesus was telling the both of them: *Take care of one another in the future when I am physically gone from you.*

The Gospel states that John took Mary into his own home and cared for her from that day on. The Book of Acts tells us that Mary and John were together in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit was given to the church. We also discover that Mary and John traveled to live in Ephesus. Temples were built in Ephesus to both Mary and John.

In the midst of dying, Jesus was still thinking of others. Hanging from the cross, in his last act of compassion, Jesus thought to ask his mother and his closest follower to take care of each other. And they did.

The Fourth Word: "My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?"

Mark 15:33-36

³³And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ³⁵And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." ³⁶And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus cries out, quoting Psalm 22. Sometime during life, we will feel abandoned. You will also experience feelings that accompany abandonment: disappointment, discouragement, or sadness, anger and even rage. These feelings come as part of being human.

At times, we may all feel abandoned by God, especially when tragedies happen to you personally. **King David** wrote Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" His words continue: "why are you so far from saving me Lord? Why are you so far from my groaning? Why do I cry out to you, but you do not answer?" Feeling abandoned.

Job lost his farms, lost the animals, lost his children, lost his wife. Job lost everything. And he felt that God had abandoned him, and Job was angry with God. He even raged at God.

It is not only people in the Bible who feel that God has abandoned them. As the second plane crashed into the Tower on 9/11, thousands of people were looking up and shouting, "My God, my God, what is happening? Where are you?" The children in Ukraine bear the relentless bombing. The parents of children cut down by gunfire demand from God answers to their anguish. In enormous horrific tragedy, people often feel abandonment.

Jesus cried out as he was suffering. It is OK to vent feelings of abandonment, as Jesus did on the cross. King David certainly did, when people wanted to kill him. Job suffered more than any other person in the Old Testament, and he, too, felt abandoned by God. Those feelings are a normal part of being human.

"Why have you forsaken me?" these are not his last words on the cross, not the end of the story. **Job** railed against God, angry at his losses, but those were not his last words. He also says, "*I know that my redeemer lives.*" "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." were not his last words of Jesus. His last words on the cross were "It is accomplished," and "Into your hands I commit my spirit." He trusted that God was there, with him, even in his dying.

The Fifth Word: "I Thirst"

John 19:28-29

²⁸After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." ²⁹A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.

Jesus shares with us his intense physical pain like any human being would in his position. "*I thirst.*" Jesus said in his famous parable in Matthew 25, "When I was **hungry**, you gave me food. When I was **thirsty**, you gave me drink. When I was in **rags**, you gave me clothing and shelter." Jesus clearly told us that when we give food, water, clothing and shelter to those who need it, it is like giving to Jesus himself.

But here on the cross, as Jesus is dying, he isn't speaking metaphorically. *He is* the physical person asking for a drink, because he is thirsty. This story is not about **spiritual** thirst such as thirsting after *God* and thirsting after *righteousness* or *peace*. It is not about thirsting after the **living water** like the woman at the well. No, this passage is about when a person was thirsty with *parched lips* and a throat that was *dry*.

The text tells us that this word from Jesus was "to fulfill the Scriptures." Jesus quotes from Psalm 69:31. "[Persecutors] gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." The soldiers used a branch of hyssop, a common vine, to extend to him a sponge full of liquid— but not water that would have helped his suffering.

Jesus experienced the enormity of human pain. There were 39 lashes across his back. There was a crown of thorns stuck into his head. There were the ten inch spikes through his wrists. Three hours hanging there. God's heart knows the enormity of human pain because God became human flesh and suffered on the cross.

God knows your physical pain when you are at your lowest point. God became a real human being and felt physical pain, and thereby also feels our physical pain. Jesus was on his last breath and he knew he was going to die any minute now. Physically, Jesus was fully humiliated. God knows our feelings of humiliation because Jesus experienced humiliation on the cross. He carries all the weight of our human vulnerability as he is hangs there on Golgotha's cross.

The Sixth Word: "It Is Finished."

John 19:30

³⁰When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished."

It Is Finished! What does that phrase mean? Does it mean, it is finished off, over and done with? Or does it mean, it is accomplished, brought to a successful completion?

The Romans thought they finished Jesus off. There were always political fires to be put out. Jesus was one more revolutionary to be eliminated. The Romans killed Jesus, and as far as they were concerned, they finished Jesus and finished the Jesus movement; it was all over and done with.

The Jewish leaders also thought it was finished, over and done with. The Jewish leaders had falsely accused Jesus, and pushed the Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate, to condemn Jesus by execution. Jesus had attacked their temple, and challenged their religious authority. But now, they thought Jesus and the Jesus movement were dead. It was finished.

The disciples probably thought Jesus and the Jesus movement were finished, over and done with. Their leader had been killed on a cross, and now they would grieve and go back to their occupations and jobs: fishermen, tax collectors, or whatever.

So "it is finished" meant that the Roman leaders, the Jewish leaders and the disciples thought Jesus was kaput, finished, over and done with.

But, "It is finished" can also mean: "It is accomplished, fulfilled, completed." The mood of the phrase is quite different than the pessimism of "it is over and done with."

Sometimes when we say, "it is finished," the mood is positive. A student graduates from high school or college. Or, you plan a big wedding and the wedding happens. Or you finally finish your taxes. So the statement, "it is finished," can be an affirmation of accomplishment.

When Jesus says, "It is finished," he is saying, "I have done the job that God gave me to do. God's will has been accomplished in my life." Jesus died to accomplish forgiveness for us, no matter how many shortcomings we have. God wants us to feel that God's will has been accomplished through our lives. Well done, good and faithful servant. It is finished. In the gospel of John, we hear Jesus' last words, a strong finale, when Jesus concluded his journey by saying, "It has been accomplished!"

The Seventh Word: "Into Your Hands I Commit My Spirit"

Luke 23: 44-46

⁴⁴It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"

Now, we contemplate the final words "and when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, He said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' And having said this, He breathed his last."

Jesus died with a prayer on his lips. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." That is Psalm 31:5 with one word added-- Father. That verse was the prayer every Jewish mother taught her child to say last thing at night. Just as we were taught, maybe, to say, "Now I lay me down to sleep," so the Jewish mother taught her child to say, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." Jesus made it even more intimate, when began with the word "Father." Even on the cross Jesus died like a child falling asleep in his father's arms.

Jesus in his final moments on his earthly journey uttered the words of the first prayer he ever learned. These last words are a testimony to what his life was all about and the lives of those who follow him. In this prayer that makes up the Seventh Word from the Cross, we see that it is a Prayer of **Communion** with God, even after the cry to God "why have you forsaken me;" a Prayer of **Confidence** in the power of God, even in the shadow of death, and a Prayer of **Commitment**--Jesus entrusting God to bless the work he had done on the Cross, new life, reconciling to the world to God through him, through the power of that cross.

Trusting our Lord and following his way of costly love, we pick up the Cross. Through God's grace, only then will we begin to understand why Jesus could shout in the presence of utter darkness, "*Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit.*" In your own lives, pick up the cross and carry it. Commit your lives to God's care. God will be with you, no matter what happens.

“Where is God” John 13: 1-17; 31b-35 Maundy Thursday

April 6, 2023

This evening we pause to gather for worship on this Thursday in Holy Week. For a brief time, our thoughts turn from the everyday pressures and routines that mark our everyday lives. For a time, we gather and remember events which took place long ago, and yet events that *still remain central* to our life together as a Christian community.

To be sure, it is difficult, probably impossible, to divorce ourselves *completely* from the on-going concerns we have as human beings. These are complex and troubling times. People struggle to find self-esteem in an increasingly impersonal society; in an interconnected social media world, folks are more lonely and isolated than ever. Ours is a society where an account number may hold more significance than a person's name or character. In this fast-changing world, we look for roots and foundations amid the powerful crosscurrents of change, like the scientific marvels of mapping and manipulating the human genome, with all the medical technology and treatments that are developed from this knowledge. Scientific marvels. We are disrupted, confused and drained by the breakdowns in so many social structures and institutions which once served as unquestioned anchors for many. We live in an age marked by *information overload*, rampant disinformation and persistent misinformation, aching *anxieties*, crippling *fears*, dangerous *neglect*, broken *dreams*, demonic *violence* and ongoing *threats of violence*.

So we ask, Where is God in a world like ours? We continue to suffer violence at so many places we can hardly keep track anymore. We keep being reminded that we live in a alienating and persistently unfair world where *innocent people* suffer and die with disturbing and frightening frequency. We ask, has *God become silent*? In a society where victims are beset by threats and burdened by despair; where the powerful turn their backs and embrace *cruelty as policy*, has *God just stopped responding*? In a world where the fabric of life is torn apart by the cynical abuse of economic and political clout, *is there a God* out there who really cares about us? In a simpler time, we thought we knew right where God was-- in a heaven far, far away; staying within the four walls of church buildings; safely categorized and explained by the ancient authorities. But *where is God now*, in this complicated and rapidly changing world? Have we become too pre-occupied to bother with God, too disenchanted to put any hope in God's presence, too scientifically advanced to feel any need for a God?

Answers do not come easily in a world seemingly gone mad, where *cruelty* and *insensitivity* all too often replace *compassion* and *concern*. We cannot painlessly explain our entanglement in all-too-frequent inhumane behavior, nor can we easily understand why we still lack solutions to the multitude of urgent social ills that continue in every age to plague. Why the *rich still get richer* and the *poor still get poorer*, and in the wealthiest nation in the world, families end up *homeless*, and children go without *food and health care*, and gun violence now tops all other causes of death for children. As Christians we struggle painfully with such questions and issues in the context of our faith and life, and still the questions do not go away. The complex realities of everyday life grow ever more vexing and confusing. *So we ask, where is God?*

Where, then, *is* God? The question becomes especially poignant when asked by those who have experienced immense suffering. Elie Wiesel was a Jewish author who managed to survive the *Holocaust*. He describes one particular incident he witnessed:

“One day when we came back from work, we saw three gallows rearing up in the assembly place. Roll call! The S.S. were all around us, with their machine guns trained, the traditional ceremony. Three victims in chains, and one of them the little servant, the sad-eyed little angel. The S.S. seemed more preoccupied, more perturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him.

“The three victims mounted together onto the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. “*Long live liberty!*” cried the two adults. But the child was silent. “Where is God? Where is he?” someone behind me asked. At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over . . . I heard a *voice within me* answer, ‘Where is God?’ He is hanging on this gallows!’”

Where is God? God is hanging on a cross-shaped gallows, a victim of callousness and brutality on the part of humankind. A victim of betrayal, the betrayal that we all share when we find ourselves *following Judas rather than Jesus*. The cross shows us the *darkest* side of the human condition. It sheds a harsh light on the disturbing and depressing *news feeds*, and on the ugly *private fears* that fill our own *anxiety closets*. “God on a gallows” *could* provoke a cry of despair: you know, “*God is dead, powerless to face the evil of that gallows and the innocent child hanging there.*” Just as we had feared. Can a God hanging on a gallows be anything but terrible news? Really?

What does God make of this world of violence and betrayal? Our lessons this evening give us a glimpse of God’s answer. The sacrament is established at the very height of tension and high anxiety. In that Upper Room, Jesus puts the world of *sorrow and betrayal and brutality* out on the table. Surely everyone would have been more pleased to have had a trouble-free evening, a “don’t speak about it” evening. But Jesus brings the harsh reality of evil inside the walls and sets it down *beside the bread and wine*. He offers a pledge of forgiveness, even to those who were about to abandon and betray. Jesus wraps himself with the towel, and puts costly love into humble foot-washing service. That job that only the lowliest of servants had to do. We remind ourselves of that serving in our foot washing this evening.

Jesus announces the presence of the yet-unnamed betrayer, and all the disciples anxiously wonder “Am *I* the one?” *One cannot break bread with Jesus without facing at least the possibility of betrayal.*

It is then, at that *precise* moment of anxiety, that Jesus says, Take, eat; take, drink. This is for you, for your lukewarm neglect, for your rebellion, your betrayal; this is given for your forgiveness. And this, friends, is where God is, and this is what God is doing. Forgiveness, for you, for me, for all.

At the cross, at *that* gallows, the human race rejects God with all the white-hot fury and cold hatred it can muster-- but the cross is not a *dead end*. God is there at the dreaded Place of the Skull, but God is not defeated by death there. The cross, that cruel symbol of death, is

transformed into a stunning sign of God's grace in the dawn of Easter morning. After the devastating fire at Notre Dame Cathedral, there were photos that showed the cross, still standing, gleaming with hope amid the charred rubble of destruction.

Where is God in our world? God is here, at work within the lives of those who, in the name of Jesus, follow the call to love and serve. God is here, still loving and saving and serving the world through us. God is here, in the word of forgiveness and at the table of Holy Communion. As we gather here at this table, we are part of Christ's body present in this place, participating most intimately in Christ's gracious love.

Despite the troubles and worries that swirl all around us, in faith we lay hold right now on God's final victory. At this table where God has *promised to be* for us, we taste the peace of God's forgiveness; we celebrate the joy of God's victory of life. This is the promise of the great banquet we will all share at the last day. Thanks be to God, for Jesus is here with us, no matter what.

A frantic message, the kind you never want to hear: “Jesus! Come—your dear friend Lazarus is so very sick. Do something, Jesus, he’s dying.” It’s the kind of *punch in the gut* message that comes *all too often*. This story of Lazarus shows how Jesus responds to *death* and the *fear of death*. Jesus does not let *death set the agenda*.

After hearing the frantic message about Lazarus, Jesus does a really *surprising* thing. Though he is like family with Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, Jesus *stays put*, two days longer. He tells his followers that “*This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory.*” This is like that promise we heard in last week’s lesson – the healed man’s blindness would *end up* being an opportunity to show God’s glory. With Jesus, something else is promised besides just the *brutal reign of human sickness and death*.

The disciples let their *fear of death* influence their decisions. And when Jesus *finally* says “*OK, now let’s go back to Judea, to Lazarus,*” they remind him that some folks in Judea want to stone him to death. But fear of death doesn’t set the agenda for Jesus. “*Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because that light is not in them.*” When his time comes, he will indeed *stumble*, carrying a cross. Jesus tells us *he is* the saving light of the world. Jesus can fully *engage that fearful darkness* of death without fear. *Even nailed to a cross*, death doesn’t command the agenda for Jesus. He himself has the power to give up his life, and he receives the power to take it up again.

Jesus continues his words with his disciples: “*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.*” As happens so often in John’s Gospel, there’s a “*misunderstanding*” in this story. The disciples don’t realize that Lazarus has *died*. “I know he’s your friend, but you really should stay safe and lay low, Jesus. Lazarus doesn’t need you if he’s *just sleeping*.” But the fear of death doesn’t determine the itinerary for Jesus—he’s headed to face death, the death of someone dear to him.

“*For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.*” So here’s part of Jesus’ agenda –the amazing signs he does for the sake of believing in him—wine in water barrels at a wedding, healing of a blind man, and now the raising of Lazarus, a sign pointing toward and an event leading up to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Having died and been raised, Jesus will not suffer death again, even though Lazarus will have to die again when his time eventually came.

In this story, we see another side of “*doubting*” Thomas. “Thomas, who was called the *Twin*, said to his fellow disciples, ‘*Let’s go with him, and we can join him in his death.*’” He assumed that death would be setting their agenda, but Thomas was prepared to commit his life to the cause anyway. Later, Thomas was still assuming that death had spoken a final word at the cross

when he demanded to see the wounds of the Risen Christ before he would believe in the power of life over death. In spite of those wounds, death had not dictated the future for Jesus, or for the followers of Jesus.

Nobody figured *Lazarus* had a future. “*Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.*” Four days buried – that’s longer than Jesus was in the tomb before Easter morning. Dead and buried—*the end*. Funeral lunch dishes done, left-overs wrapped up, friends and family hanging around, awkward, following the script of mourning--dealing with the harsh realities of dying. “Four days dead, Jesus.” Dead.

Martha’s wrenching “if only” lament comes with that death territory. “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*” “Couldn’t you have said a prayer as soon as you heard, and worked your long distance magic healing? Or *at least* come as soon as you got the word?” She does confess her faith in the power of Jesus—“*but even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him*” --but why, oh why didn’t he use it for her? When death has hijacked the day, it is so terribly hard to imagine any other agenda at work.

Jesus responds with a wonderfully comforting passage that is a favorite for funerals. “*Your brother will rise again.*” Martha replies, ‘*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*’ Jesus tells her, ‘*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*’ She said to him, ‘*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.*’”

We can ask “Do *we* believe it?” It’s hard. Martha has the hope of the resurrection at the last day, but how much was that really doing for her on that funeral day? Indeed, in our life, death’s agenda is still at work. But *now* it comes with an asterisk. Here’s what can overthrow the agenda of death: trusting that promise from Jesus, “I AM the resurrection. I am the life.”

The mourners were following an agenda of the rituals of comfort and support at the time of death when they went to Martha’s sister Mary. She also has the stunningly painful accusation – or at least, the cry of aching loss: “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*” Mary is understandably broken-hearted at the death, absorbed in her grief. And note here that Jesus was grieving too. Death does not set the agenda for Jesus, but he confronts death; he takes it in, he feels the sharp pain of loss. He sees his friends hurting.

Death can pit one person off against the other, and set up the sniping. “*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?*” You can just hear it. Why me? God isn’t fair, or maybe God just doesn’t care. Grief can overshadow any hope of glory.

When Jesus tells them to “*Take away the stone,*” Martha, ever practical Martha, says “*Uh Lord, maybe you don’t want to do that. already there is a stench. He’s been dead four days.*” This isn’t just death --- this is destruction, the *lost-forever* smell that we *always* want to keep sealed up.

Jesus doesn't hesitate to face the stench, and we must also face the messy power of death and death's disturbance: "Unbind him, and let him go." That's pretty up close and personal. In a sermon I heard years ago, the bottom line was "*I raise 'em, but you gotta unwrap 'em.*"

Jesus says, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*" Many believed because of the raising of Lazarus. But merely *hearing* the news that God has an agenda of new life doesn't assure that the death agenda will be dropped. In the verses that follow today's reading, the stubborn power of death to set an agenda comes out – the religious leaders are afraid of the Roman Empire's threats of destruction. The chaos they fear; the raising of Lazarus sets into motion plans to try to take Jesus out of the picture. They decided that they would rather help the Roman Empire kill one man, than wait for it to kill them all. That truly is an example of the agenda of death at work.

Yet the Gospel has for us a wondrous irony that truly does demonstrate the glory of God – at the cross the brutal agenda of death becomes the means for life's final Easter triumph over death. Jesus was indeed about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but for all whole world, for you and me. This is the glory of God, that the *darkness does not overwhelm the light*. Death does not win out. We do not have to be held captive to the power of hatred and greed; we do not have to live controlled by fear, even when it may seem to us that death is winning. Jesus invites us to believe otherwise, and to trust that he is indeed our sure promise of life. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, our life *eternal* even in our lives *now*. Lord, help us to trust in your promise of life transformed. Guide and empower our lives, to give You glory. Raise us up, unbind us, and send us out with your Spirit Life.

“The Unexpected Evangelist” Romans 5: 1-11; John 4: 4-42 Lent 3 March 12, 2023

Everyone needs water, every day, and in Jesus’ day this was true just as it is today. Then, as now, in many parts of the world, getting water was *women and children’s* work. They walked, often long distances, every day to fill their jars of water. In today’s gospel, a *woman* has come to a well at the heat of *midday*, rather than at evening or early in the morning. Those cooler times of the day would normally be a social time for the women of the village, but the woman in today’s reading is anxious to avoid the stares and whispered gossip of her neighbors. So, she comes to the well at *noon*.

Jesus crosses many barriers in his conversation at the well. This woman is an outsider; she might as well have been wearing some kind of *scarlet letter* of shame around her neck. Yet, Jesus engages her in a *serious extended conversation*. She responds by daring to share with the whole village the news that she has encountered Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah.

From the perspective of Jesus and his disciples, in their day, this woman at the well was an outsider for at least three reasons. First, *she was not a Jew*. She was a Samaritan, and Jews thought Samaritans were traitors to race and religion. At the time of Jesus, the bitter Jewish-Samaritan hatred was hundreds of years old. After the Golden Age of King David and King Solomon, the nation split apart, forming the Northern Kingdom, called *Israel*, and the Southern Kingdom, called *Judah*. After the invading Assyrian army swept down and finally destroyed the Northern Kingdom and its capital city of Samaria in 720 B.C., only a few stragglers were left in the land; and they intermarried with the incoming invaders. Jews, as the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah came to be called, hated the “half-breed” Samaritans with their competing claims on having the true religion and place for worship.

Jesus’ conversation with this outcast woman happens at an historic spot. Jacob’s Well is located at the foot of Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans had built their *own* temple to *rival* the one in Jerusalem. Judean zealots *destroyed* the temple of the Samaritans in the year 128 before Christ. No wonder this Samaritan is amazed to be having a civil conversation about religion with a Jewish teacher.

There was also tension between the Judeans and folks from the area of Galilee, north of Samaria. Galilee had, over the years, seen a greater mix of nationalities among the peoples who lived there, greater than in Judah, the area around Jerusalem. Jesus came from Galilee, and it was a common saying in Judea that “*nothing good could come from Galilee*.” I guess we can see that prejudice is nothing new.

Jesus did not have to pass *through* Samaria to get from Judea to Galilee. He “had to” go because of his mission. Most Jewish travelers “*went around*,” east of Samaria, on the busy road down along the Jordan River. Kind of like when folks in my neighborhood on the far-eastern edge of Detroit wouldn’t dream of driving directly downtown on the surface streets through the “*wrong*” neighborhoods. They made it a point to take the freeway, cut off by walls of concrete from the struggling city surrounding it. But Jesus chooses to cross over to the *wrong side of the tracks*, with his wide-eyed disciples trekking along at his side.

In a first century sort of Jim Crow, “proper” Jews just *had no dealings* with the Samaritans. Yet Jesus sent his disciples into their town to buy lunch. Before they had started following Jesus, it was *unlikely* that they would ever have considered buying food in a *Samaritan* town. And they thought it strange *indeed* to see Jesus chatting with a Samaritan.

Second, it was an unlikely conversation that Jesus was having because *she was a woman*. As remarkable as it was that Jesus had chosen to travel through Samaria, and was having a theological conversation with a *Samaritan*, the fact that he was talking with a strange woman in public seemed to be even more amazing. *Notice that* John tells us the disciples, when they returned from doing the grocery shopping, were *most* surprised by Jesus *talking with a woman in public*. Jesus was a rabbi, and the customs did not permit rabbis to talk *even to their wives, sisters, or daughters* in public, *much less* have a long conversation with a foreign woman of questionable social status and reputation. Women were outsiders in their own communities, just as Samaritans were outsiders for Jews. Jesus broke down those walls.

And third, this woman was *not married*. She had no one to provide for her except the man with whom she now lived. Was it someone who kept her around as a convenience but wasn’t about to marry a woman who’d already had and lost five husbands? We don’t know whether five men had divorced or abandoned the woman at the well – *women were not free to initiate a divorce* – or if she’d been widowed 5 times or what. All we know about her now is that she’s not married to the man she is with. We don’t know *how* Jesus knew about her-- just that he did, and he treated her with remarkable respect.

Just as last week with Nicodemus, this long conversation has some things that *don’t translate* into English very well. The term “*living water*,” in its everyday meaning, refers to flowing water – like a river or a spring bubbling up from the ground. So, the woman at the well is naturally a little skeptical when Jesus says he’s going to give her such water. The guy doesn’t even have a bucket -- after all, *he’s* the one who asked her for a drink. And from her initial misunderstanding, there flows a life-changing conversation.

This outsider, out working in the noonday sun to avoid the stares and gossip of her neighbors is, in the Gospel of John, the first witness that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. She runs back to those unfriendly neighbors, inviting them to get to know this Jesus better. She can hardly believe it (*this cannot be the Christ, can it?*). She is unashamed, because Jesus does not shame her – and she runs to share the astounding good news: “he says *he’s* the one we’ve been waiting for, God’s chosen redeemer”—“I know what he said and how he treated me. Could this *really* be the Messiah?”

If “*noon*” means anything besides just the time of day--this is John after all -- I think may stand in contrast with the “*night*” of Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus that we heard about last week. Nicodemus was “in the dark;” he doesn’t see the point that Jesus was trying to make. The woman at the well is *in the light*. . . in the brightest part of the day; Jesus opens her eyes and she wants to enlighten her townsfolk. *So, she becomes the first evangelist*. Sometimes a simple act of kindness and human interaction with such an outsider can be an extremely powerful healing event, and transforming for those people that the outsider touches – in ways you would never guess at the time.

The woman at the well was an *unlikely witness* to Jesus, an *unexpected agent* for God's activity. She was an unlikely agent, and *so was a human Jesus* who got tired and thirsty and hungry, and left his disciples standing with their mouths hanging open in amazement at his rule-breaking, boundary-crossing behavior. We are also called to be agents of God's outreach, as wildly unlikely as that calling may seem. God provides the *living water* for us too – Paul writes about it in our second lesson: *for while we still were sinners, Christ died for us*. Christ may use our buckets at the well, but the *living water* we receive is the promise of his life, death and resurrection.

Jesus doesn't condemn the woman at the well -- but begins the conversation at the very place where she was the most broken -- the loss of five husbands, and a current living arrangement that marked her as an outcast. Someone has said that God can mend a broken heart, but *only* if God gets all the broken pieces, and Jesus, well, he had all the pieces here. The conversation at the well shows us that a relationship with Jesus Christ has the power to put the pieces together again into a new picture of transformation, hope and renewal.

The message at the well is as fresh and timely *now* as it was in Jesus' day. The particular traditions of our various temples will not determine *true* worship, nor will anyone's race, or gender, or pocketbook, or position of power. What *will* shape our worship and our lives is the *living water of our baptismal calling*, the challenge and encouragement of God's Word preached and God's meal shared, the presence of Christ's Spirit in each of us – and the amazing gosselly good-news message: when we could not make *ourselves* “good enough for God,” while we still had our backs turned to God's love, Christ died for us. *For all*. Inside our comfort zone or on the *other* side of our walls. For all. Let's not be afraid to “travel through Samaria” – to see God at work beyond the boundaries. Let us be as bold in sharing the message of Jesus as that unlikely Samaritan woman evangelist.

“Being Born Again, and Again” Genesis 12: 1- 4a; John 3: 1-17 March 5, 2023
Lent 2A

Today’s lesson includes that very famous verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” *John 3:16*. Fans in the stands wave placards at the TV cameras: John 3:16, simply those letters and numbers, 3 feet tall. Luther called this verse “the Gospel in a nutshell.” Today, we get this verse, within the 3rd Chapter of the Gospel of John. Jesus is having a conversation with Nicodemus. It’s sort of a first century version of “*Nick @ Nite*.”

Nicodemus starts the conversation: “I know you are a teacher sent from God because of the signs that you’ve been doing.” So, a word about those “signs.” In the previous chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus had done his first “sign” when he turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The Gospel of John shows Jesus doing many actions that signify God at work in Jesus. These signs aren’t *intended* to be, in themselves, the bedrock of faith-- as we learn later in the Gospel of John. The disciple Thomas claims “I need to see it to believe it.” And Jesus replies, “Blessed are they who have *not seen*, but yet have believed.” That’s a word to us too.

Nicodemus is curious about Jesus because of the impressive miracles, the signs. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, so he knows God’s law and cares about keeping it. Nicodemus is more than an ordinary Pharisee; he’s a member of the *Sanhedrin*, the ruling council of Israel, seventy powerful leaders headed by no less than the High Priest of the Temple.

Nicodemus goes to Jesus in the nighttime. Perhaps he is worried about what the other important people would think if they saw him having a conversation with Jesus, the *rabble-rouser* *rabbi* from Galilee of all places. Perhaps it’s the only time he can find to talk privately. But, at any rate, Nicodemus is “in the dark,” in more ways than one, as Jesus has the kind of conversation with him that occurs *several* times in the Gospel of John: Jesus shares who he is, but the person talking with Jesus gets confused, and so Jesus goes on to teach more about himself. We hear another conversation like that next week, with the Samaritan Woman at the well, in Chapter 4.

We heard the meat of the Good News nutshell in verse 16. “God so loved the world. . .” But there is some other familiar material in this passage too. In the 3rd verse, Jesus says: “*no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above*.” Does that sound familiar to you? Well maybe try it this way, “*no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again*.” So, here’s the *translation* thing: the original Greek of this passage uses a word with a *double meaning*. Like some English words, you need to get the meaning from the context, and sometimes that can be pretty confusing. The Greek adverb used in verse 3 [*anōthen*] can be translated either born “*again*” or born “*from above*.”

So, Nicodemus hears this word as “*born again*.” Can you imagine poor Nicodemus trying to figure that one out? Is Jesus serious here? He tries a kind of an impossible “*press the reset button*” image in his mind. “How can someone *all grown up* literally re-enter their mother’s womb? Rabbi Jesus, I don’t really think my mother is going to go for that, and to tell you the truth, *I’m* not too keen on it either!”

So, Nicodemus is confused. Jesus goes on—though I’m not sure Nicodemus will be tracking on *this* one either. “. . . *unless one is born of water AND the SPIRIT, one cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.*” In verse 13, Jesus is picking up on the “born from above” sense of the word, with his talk about “*ascending and descending*” from heaven. I’m sure that by this point, poor Nicodemus is *really* in the dark, clueless about where this nighttime conversation will lead him.

Nicodemus, in asking how he could possibly get himself born “*again*,” assumes that he needs to *do* something in order to cause this to happen. Jesus points him in another direction altogether. “This birth that I’m talking about, it is *not* sometime that you do.” *Think about it.* You do not, indeed you *cannot*, give physical birth to yourself. God is the one who *breathes life*—the Spirit— into us and gives us the holy rebirth from above.

We might think that being “*born again*” or “*born from above*” is a commitment or a decision that we make for ourselves. In much popular religious talk, being “*born again*” has often been turned into a kind of necessary *personal religious accomplishment*, rather than a mysterious and amazing gracious *gift* from God. *Believing in Christ* becomes the one thing that “*ya gotta do*” in order to get saved. The problem with that? Then we end up looking to *our act of believing or saying the right words to save us rather than God’s free gift of salvation through Jesus*. What’s worse, sometimes we hear Christians *use* the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection as a kind of *weapon* of God’s condemnation of “all those *nonbelievers*” who don’t fit into the right mold. “*I came not to condemn the world,*” Jesus says in verse 17. “*Did so,*” popular theology insists.

You and I didn’t choose to be born. We draw our first breath with a wail of protest. *Somebody else* is in charge. So it is with faith, our birth *into* life in God: God has claimed us and *blessed us to be a blessing to others*. We may have first encountered and responded to God’s grace and love in *one life-transforming moment*, like the “born again” experience some churches require. But if we grew into faith gradually, or took a road that doubled back and had some twists and turns, well, that’s the Holy Spirit’s work too. It’s not about what *we* do. It is God’s methods and God’s timing, God’s outreach to us through Jesus that creates and sustains a saving faith.

If asked when I was “saved,” I *could* say, “Well, it was about 3 o’clock on a Friday afternoon about two thousand years ago.” If asked when I was “born again,” I could say “I was born again in August of 1951, when I was baptized in the little town of Mora, Minnesota, by my grandfather at the font in his Missouri Synod Lutheran parish there.”

But you know what else? We are “born again” each time we remember and trust that we are, each of us, claimed in Christ as God’s child, baptized into a new identity. We are the people of Jesus, “being Jesus” together here and now. I am “born again,” and again and again, each time that I have had to leave behind my familiar territory and risk taking a step forward into an unknown, as Sarah and Abraham did, relying on the promise of God to lead me. Later, I can often look *back* and realize that it turned out to be exactly the right thing to do. You don’t know that at the time.

In our first lesson, Abraham experiences a kind of rebirth from above. He hears God's call to start out all over again, to press the reset button in his life; a new life that God would show him, moving toward the new place where God would lead him. In obedience and trust, Abraham *leaves the familiar behind* and follows God, to be reborn into an *unknown* future.

If we are to minister in Christ's name, in today's world, we have to be willing to ease our grip on the familiar past, to think new thoughts, to embrace new needs in new ways, to sing new songs. To risk new responses, so that God can continue to love the world, through us. s hard as it may be to imagine sometimes, YOU and I are *called* to be God's gifts to the world. That's not about boasting, it's about God's gift. Born again, from above, in the waters of Baptism; claimed by God, living in the midst of temptation. Forgiven and re-created daily—you are given *in the name of Christ to the world*. You, with all your sins and the deceits of the world clinging to you, are daily swallowed up in the jaws of Jesus' death, where your sins are forgiven so that you can begin each day new, reborn, given to the world each new day in the name of Christ. You *have, in Jesus' name*, been *blessed to be a blessing, as Abraham was*.

I pray that God will continue to show us how to be that blessing and give us courage and wisdom to carry it out. God so loved the world that God sent each of us--marked with the sign of the cross of Christ forever. Thanks be to God for life renewed, again and again . . . and again.

Temptations in the Wilderness

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4: 1-11

Lent 1

February 26, 2023

On the old TV show “Hee Haw,” Doc Campbell is confronted by a patient who says he broke his arm in two places. So, the doc tells him, “*Well, then, my advice is to stay out of them places!*” Jesus did not stay out of the places where he would have to wrestle with temptation. Still wet from his baptism in the Jordan River, with those words from heaven still ringing in his ears: “*this is my son, the beloved one, in whom I am well pleased,*” Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. And there he wrestles. How should Jesus carry out his mission?

Although he is tempted to *turn away* from the path that God has set for him, Jesus chooses the way of humble service that leads him to the cross. That path led from the Garden of Eden, that first place of temptation; it continued through 40 years of testing of the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness. The path took Jesus into 40 days of wrestling with the desert detours that the devil offered, and it led to the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane. And God’s path leads to an empty tomb in the garden at Easter.

The humorist Oscar Wilde once wrote: “I can resist anything -- *except temptation.*” We laugh, a little sadly maybe, because, *well*, he’s nailed it, hasn’t he? From the very beginning in the Garden of Eden, the human race has been *tempted* to “Be Like God.” Jesus actually *was* God, yet he did not fall for that temptation in the wilderness.

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are like those that Adam and Eve faced in the Garden. Stones to bread—it’s the temptation of materialism, simply *taking* the things we want for ourselves, right now -- even at the cost of our own integrity and spiritual well-being. The apple was a good thing. But we are tempted to use the good things of God *against* God who *gives* us all those good things. “Do this, and your deepest needs and cravings will be met *right now*”—well, you know that’s how advertisers entice folks to buy *their* product. We’re swimming in that kind of message. But God tells us – *your stuff won’t save you*, so “don’t put your trust in all the wrong places.”

Then the next temptation: “*throw yourself down; see if God will rescue you.*” go ahead, put God to the test. In the Garden of Eden, they heard it something like this from the tempter: “God’s limits for human life are not *really* good. God isn’t telling the truth; you won’t *really* die if you eat that apple.”

Jesus says, “Trust, don’t test.” Here the devil quotes a verse from a psalm, but Jesus won’t try to build himself up using God as a prop. When *we* are reckless with our lives and the lives of our neighbors, we put God’s care for us to the test. God gives us *freedom* along with all the other *good gifts* in our life: our selves, our families and other significant relationships, our environment and all those many contexts and structures that make life possible. God wants us to use our freedom responsibly to tend and care for these, and not do our own careless version of throwing ourselves down from the pinnacle of the temple. It matters to our neighbors and ourselves how we take care of what we have been given. And it matters to God.

And then the final temptation: hang your hearts on Satan's ultimate power; act *as if* the Evil One rules the world, and *not God*. This is like Adam and Eve hearing the implied claim that *Satan* is the one who *really* knows the truth about the apple, and then believing that Satan can give something vital where God just seems to be holding back. We do well to remember that sometimes God doesn't give us what we want, yet God promises to give us what we need.

Eve and Adam were tempted in the Garden to "*Be Like God*." They stumbled into sin and shame, and they were driven out into that vast wilderness beyond the Garden of Eden. It's a wilderness that we endure even now. Jesus joins us there, where he wrestled with the same human temptations that we all confront.

But Jesus did not fall victim to the tempter. He did *not* "*try to be like God*" to spare himself the trials of his life, although *he actually could have*. He faced the tragic outcomes of hatred and fear, trusting completely in God. Through what must have been the *most tormenting temptation* of all, he willingly suffered the abandonment of his friends and cruelest capital punishment that a cruel empire could inflict, a cross.

It's *not* that the things the devil wanted Jesus to do were bad in themselves. Jesus *did* feed the poor, he did do amazing signs and wonders, and he certainly *did* engage the political rulers, overturning their arrogant claims to have *ultimate* authority. But Jesus walked this earth among us, and as the hymn in Philippians Chapter 2 puts it, he did not "*count equality with God a thing to be grasped*." Not a fruit to be plucked from the forbidden tree--no stones to bread, no spectacularly miraculous theatrics to whisk away the horror of the cross, no shock and awe army of angels to rescue him from his enemies. Where Adam and Eve *failed* in the *Garden of Eden*, Jesus *succeeded* in the *wilderness*, and in the Garden of Gethsemane where he would be tested again.

We all need food, we all want to be recognized, and we all look for power to carry out our purposes. These are basic human needs and wants. But though he was tested in these things, Jesus kept his trusting connection to God. He honored the human limits of God's creation, the creation that God pronounced "*good*." Called to be co-creators with God, we *answer to God* and not to our own selves. By trying to "*be like God*," Eve and Adam distorted that goodness. When the creatures try to claim the Creator's place, then even the *good things* will get put out of whack. And we all have turned our backs on God. Who among us doesn't share Oscar Wilde's situation--we can resist anything, *except temptation*. Jesus is the only one who has never given in.

Notice, Jesus was not tempted because he had *gone against* God's will. It was, after all, the *Spirit of God* who led him in the wilderness. And temptation isn't just about messing around with bad things. The *toughest* temptations involve *good* things used in a *bad* way.

The stronger we get in our disciple-life, the more powerful and subtle the temptations will be; there's no getting off the hook. We *will* run up against our limits, and find ourselves at the thirsty, hungry end of our rope, wrestling with our own demons in our own wildernesses. But here's the surprising good news that turns our fears upside down: the *wilderness* is where the grace of God comes to us *most powerfully*. In the wilderness, the Spirit is equipping us for our spiritual battles. *Faith, hope, love, trust, endurance, wisdom, community*: these gifts help us resist the daily temptations that wear us down. And these are the gifts that grow in the wilderness.

Jesus does not turn to power plays; he stays always rooted in his relationship with God. Being real and being vulnerable like that can add up to a *cross*—or to whatever sort of public lynching, relentless lying, or cruel character assassinations that the world can dish out. Jesus went to the very heart of the beast, taking on our self-serving fears, the cruel violence and heart-rending betrayals of our own *wilderness world* down to the very depths: death, the final test. And out of those depths, the new life of the Easter Garden shows us that God *has* something new in mind for this world. Something new for us.

Jesus is more than just an *example out there, an impossible example*, good for maybe guilting us into trying really hard to be *just a little bit better*. Or, if failing that, finding somebody else to take the blame. Jesus *joins* us right here in our wilderness, *loving* even to the point of dying for our sake, so that we may have new life in him.

We can trust God in the midst of the temptations in our wildernesses, for we have seen in Jesus how much God loves us. We can trust God's promise when we pray: *send your angels also to minister to us*. Thanks be to God, even for the temptations and the wilderness. Thanks be to God for the hope that holds our hearts. Thanks be to God who sends the Holy Spirit to keep our hearts turned to God, our ears tuned to the music of the Gospel, and our feet on the path following our Lord.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The words of Ash Wednesday. *Ashes, ashes, we all fall down*, the old children’s game sings, and we do. All fall down, one way or another, or quite a *few more* ways than one, if you are anything like me. We are dust, though most of the time on most days, this stark awareness-- “*you are dust, and to dust you shall return*”-- hides out in the shadows of our busy lives, in the recesses of our consciousness and our conscience. But some days are *dusty days*, and some dusty days threaten to choke us to death.

This evening, we included Psalm 51 in our service. Tradition has it that King David wrote this psalm after the prophet Nathan nailed him for the king’s adultery and murder in his affair with Bathsheba. Surely David was choking on his dusty day: “*I know my offenses and my sin is ever before me.*” Ashes to ashes; dust to dust. A day of reckoning had come for David.

Reckoning comes in many forms. Maybe the cumulative results of a lifetime of bad habits and attachments rise up to accuse us. Or maybe we crash up against other limits that cannot be ignored: failing health, fading dreams, or the follies of those we love which just break our hearts. Maybe the reckoning brings unintended consequences of bad policies. Incidents and accidents. Fears take hold and violence explodes. Prices rise faster than income, and jobs and homes and hope threaten to slip away. The earth itself exacts a reckoning, with storms and floods and droughts that *used to be* unprecedented. *Ashes to ashes; dust to dust.*

King David knew that on his day of reckoning, it was God who, at the core of it, called him to account: “*Against You only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.*” On this Ash Wednesday, *this* day of dust, we attempt to tune out the other calling voices in our lives, and remember that *for us as well*, it is, at heart, actually God we have fought against or failed to heed. And only God can clear our life and clean our hearts. Only God can restore and reconcile us.

And that “*renewal of our right spirit*” is exactly what God wants for us. *Why* do this repentance work of Lent? Why ask these hard questions and attempt to confront these difficult realities? Because God knows that’s the spiritual surgery that works. “*You delight in truth deep within me, and would have me know wisdom deep within.*” As profoundly painful as that deep truth can be for us to confront within ourselves, that is where God’s steadfast love and compassion can touch us most powerfully.

12-step recovery groups know this; that’s why one of the steps for dealing with addiction is to “*take a searching and fearless moral self-inventory.*” As we take the risk to trust the promise of God’s steadfast love and compassion, we can dare to take in the wisdom that unmask our false attachments and misdirected trust. The wisdom that warns us: where our treasure is, that’s where our hearts will also be. The wisdom that treasures our reliance on the Promise of Jesus, source of joy and hope.

Remember that you are dust; ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Why do this dust thing, leaving our busy-ness behind today, and sit here paying attention to the deathly dust? Why put on the cross-shaped smear of ash which pulls the elephant of sin and death into our spiritual living room? Well, hear the voice of a longing God: “*Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and*

merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Here, we can acknowledge that we don’t need to *hide from* or *defend against* or *give in to* the inner voice that accuses relentlessly—“*no good, wasted, why bother, not enough, never enough?*” God *challenges* us to turn away from our hiding and defending and despairing, and God’s Spirit will help us to heal.

Is your spirit troubled? Is your heart broken? Listen: “*The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise.*” Do you feel like you just don’t have what the world – and, yes, even *God* – demands of you? Here, at this moment on this *day of dust*, we remember that we are *creatures* –animated dust – our *time* is limited, our *reach* is limited, our *vision* and our *capacities* are limited. We are not God. But God *is*, and in Jesus, God reaches out to us with enduring love.

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. This could be, I suppose, both Bad News and Good News. The bad news is that, if we trust in ourselves and our actions to bear the weight of our worth, those words “*you are dust, and to dust you shall return*” will bring us up short, as the relentless voice deep inside nags us for our failures. Dusty Days tell us we cannot be god, as hard as we find ourselves trying.

What’s *good* about dusty days? The good news is that on dusty days we may learn that we can give up trying to *be* god, and put ourselves in God’s hands, because we *have* a God who is “*gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*” We have a God who reaches out to us on the cross, precisely at the broken places. And what do we know about this God?

From our second lesson: Paul writes to the fractured church in Corinth: “*On behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” Be reconciled. Not, try really hard to reconcile *yourself* to God. In Jesus, God has come down to us. To be dust with us, God’s presence here, to heal and restore us, and send us into serving, sharing the good news of God’s love in a hurting world.

As we head into this season of Lent, we join in the prayer: “*Have mercy on us, O God, according to your steadfast love and compassion.*” As we dare to bring our broken hearts to God, we remember that broken-open hearts can receive God’s love poured out because they *are* opened up to it. As we take spiritual inventory, give us courage to hope and make room for the Spirit, and wisdom to know when to just *rest* awhile in your presence.

Even on the dustiest of days, we pray for ourselves, for those we hold dear, and for God’s hurting world around us: “*Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me this day with your bountiful Spirit.*”

Today we shift gears: Every year on this last Sunday of Epiphany, the season of seeing the life of the human Jesus, our Gospel reading recalls this strange and amazing mountain-top experience of three of Jesus' disciples that we call the Transfiguration. We shift gears, with *Ash Wednesday* and *Lent* close on the horizon.

The remarkable event we hear about in today's lesson discloses Jesus' identity to the inner core of disciples who went with him up the mountain. Can you imagine what it was like to be up there with Peter and James and John? Suddenly, amazingly, they see a blindingly dazzling Jesus, standing there talking with Moses and Elijah. Jesus with the *Lawgiver* and the *Prophet*, the pillars of *God's entire revelation* up to that point. They would never be the same again, having been to that mountain.

There is a remarkable true story of a man named Larry Walters, a 33-year-old truck driver who, for as long as he could remember, had wanted to fly. But he'd never had the *time* or *money* or *opportunity* to be a pilot. The Air Force had turned him away because of his poor eyesight. So, he spent a lot of *summer afternoons* sitting in his backyard in his old aluminum chair—the ordinary kind with the *webbing* and the *rivets*.

Then one day Larry hooked 43 helium-filled surplus weather balloons to his chair. He put on a parachute, hooked a 6-pack of beer to his chair, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung a BB-gun over his shoulder to pop the balloons when he wanted to come down.

He lifted off in his lawn chair expecting to climb maybe *a couple of hundred feet* over his neighborhood. But instead, he shot up 16,000 feet right through the approach corridor to the *Los Angeles International Airport*. He was spotted from two commercial airliners. So *that* made the news. When asked by the press why he did it, Larry answered: "*Well, you can't just SIT there.*"

These days, with all of the news about suspicious balloons being shot down, Larry Walters might have made some different plans. Yet, he would never be the same again after his *trip to the heights in his lawn chair*. He had seen things and felt things that would forever shape his life. And, so it came to be with Peter, James, and John. The dazzling *light*, the *cloud*—signs and symbols of the glory of God. Up there on the mountain, God had *cracked the door* to a transformed future for them, though they *did not know it yet*.

The disciples wanted to *stay* and camp out there. Yet, *Jesus didn't stay* up there. He makes his way to Jerusalem, where his friends will *betray* him, and he will *suffer* terribly and *die* at the hands of his enemies. The light fades and Jesus leads his disciples back *down off the mountain, down to the plain*, where the needs for ministry cry out.

This longing to stay up there on the mountain-top, is trying to have *Resurrection without the Cross*, going directly from Hosanna to Alleluia with no wilderness in between. We prefer some *spiffy epiphany*, some spectacular *holy aha!*, something that can, *in a moment*, fix everything that

weighs us down in our lives. We are tempted to “*hold onto the glory*” for ourselves. But this turns us away from the *risky, loving service* to our neighbor that comes from the messy ministry down on the plain. Too often, we prefer to listen to other authorities, whose message is easier to take.

It’s like the man who is holding onto a branch, dangling out over a deep ravine, hanging on for dear life. He hollers out, “Is anybody up there?” And receives the answer, “Don’t worry, I’m here.” So the desperate man pleads, “What should I do?” The voice answers, “Let go, trust me. You have to let go to take my hand.” There is a long pause, and then “Is anybody ELSE out there?”

The Transfiguration story is placed in the gospel after Jesus’ first prediction of his suffering, death, and resurrection, and before the story of how that suffering unfolded. The disciples had had been given the vision that could point them beyond their *doubts* and their *unfaithfulness*. It pointed to a transformation beyond the *suffering* and *death*. And they would never be the same again, having been on that journey.

So, if we’re not supposed to hang out on Glory Mountain, then *what is this strange event about?* Maybe it’s like the picture on a jigsaw puzzle box, helping us get the jumbled and confusing pieces of our life right. When you’ve seen a picture of how *everything turns out in the end*, it affects how you view the present. Today, on the hinge between Epiphany and Lent, our glimpse of the glory is meant to sustain us in our calling, to help us faithfully carry out our cross-bearing ministry in a jagged world of *suffering, anxiety, despair, selfish hatred, brokenness, emptiness*--where the powers of evil and death threaten, depressingly, to have the final word.

In the last speech of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave just before he was assassinated in Memphis, he echoed Moses as he spoke movingly of “*having been to the mountain.*” He seemed to know that his life would end, soon and violently. The glory of God’s vision for *justice and peace in this country* had sustained him and gave him the *courage and peace* to keep on going down on the plain, in spite of the powers of evil arrayed against him.

God says about Jesus: “*This is my Son, the beloved one, with whom I am well pleased.*” Like bookends in this season of Epiphany, these are the same words we heard at the baptism of Jesus. But now, on the mountain of Transfiguration, there’s more. “*Listen to Jesus. This is my guy, pay attention to him.*” Jesus is headed to Jerusalem. This announcement from the cloud, is well timed to help the disciples deal with the difficult days ahead, days of suffering, doubt, and betrayal. And the word about Jesus is also meant to help us. We face temptations to “*hold onto the glory*” and reject the cross. Jesus faithfully continues to trust, following the course which leads to his *cross*, in spite of many temptations to self-serving displays of power and glory— next Sunday we’ll hear about Jesus facing some of those. Jesus Christ heads back down off the mountain, down to the plain where the needs for ministry cry out. He sets his face toward Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die. The glory on the mountain does not turn Jesus from the un-glorious path toward Calvary; rather, it helps equip him for it.

Up on that mountain, Peter, James, and John had been given nothing less than a glimpse into God’s future. Jesus tells his friends: Don’t tell anyone about what you saw and heard until after the *suffering*. Until after the *death*. Until after the *Resurrection*. They had a glimpse past the cross that Jesus had predicted a few days before; past their *doubts* and shattered hopes, past their

unfaithfulness. When you've seen how everything turns out in the end, it can certainly help shape how you view the present.

Transfiguration gives us a brief glimpse into the glory of God at work hidden in *simple ordinary stuff* among ordinary people, like you and me. In ordinary bread and wine, we taste the glory of God. Hidden in this simple sharing, we experience the splendor of *sins forgiven* and peace restored. And beyond the *veil* of our own limited perception, we are invited here to a *foretaste of the feast to come*, where we join in the heavenly banquet celebration with all the saints in light.

Worship Jesus, on whatever mountain you may encounter the bright light of God's glory. But then, *listen* to Jesus-- follow him down the mountain path, onto the *highways* and *byways* of your ordinary lives, where we are called to be lamps shining in a dark place, always reflecting the light of Christ. We can trust that we share with him in the Easter victory. May the Holy Spirit give us ears to listen, and hearts to respond, so that we too can receive again the *courage and stamina* to continue following Jesus, crucified and risen for the life of the world.

“Beyond Looking for Loopholes” Epiphany 6
Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Matthew 5: 21-37

February 12, 2023

Our gospel reading for today continues Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, which we have been reading for the past couple of weeks. Jesus is teaching that he has not come to *do away* with God’s Law, but to *fulfill* it-- to show its true nature and purpose. As Jesus teaches about fulfilling the Law, he uses examples drawn from the Ten Commandments: do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not commit adultery.

In today’s lesson, just days before *Valentine’s Day*, we hear painfully harsh words about divorce and adultery. We get sentimental and maybe even a bit mushy about romantic love, and for a day, we have flowers and chocolates and cards with big red hearts. But the next day, the sun will still rise on the lingering infidelities that can litter our lives. For some, the home is the site of emotional battles, and for battered wives and abused children, home is statistically the most *dangerous* place to be.

Sometimes we treat these commandments as the bare minimum--how *little* can I do and still be OK with God? *Those legal loopholes*. The verse that comes right before today’s reading lays down the *sharp contrast* between looking for the loopholes and true obedience from the heart. Jesus can stop us short too: “unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” *That’s hard! Where do we go with that?*

There’s a pattern in Jesus’ teaching— *you have heard it said* – the traditional righteousness—and then: “*but I say to you . . .*” Jesus speaks of a righteousness that goes the extra mile, all the way home to God’s powerfully transforming vision for us and for the world. God’s version of righteousness.

This Sermon on the Mount is not, at its heart, about making each other feel better. It is about the business of loving God and living faithfully within that love. It is not a handy cookbook with recipes for happier living. Of course, when we live out God’s commandments, things generally do *end up* better. *Still, these teachings of Jesus are not about simply getting by in this world, but provide a framework for God’s better way of being together-- a way of justice, peace, and love.*

Jesus changes the question: no longer is it “what can we do to manage God’s demands?” but rather, “what is it that God *intends* for us through this law?” Jesus reminds us we are *made for human community*, where people can grow together in their capacity to honor God as they love and serve the world around them. When relationships more fully reflect God’s intention, unstained by selfishness and sin, these human connections can reveal God’s loving relationship with us.

In today’s Old Testament lesson, as the Israelites prepare to enter the Promised Land, Moses tells them “I am giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death. Choose life.” Jesus is sometimes seen as a new Moses. He knows how difficult it is for *us* to fully choose God’s life. In every example of his teaching here, Jesus looks beyond the outward action, clear through to the inner *source* of the actions. Not just putting on Band-Aids, but doing surgery to remove the tumor. He doesn’t just want to attempt to rescue a few survivors on the battlefield; he wants to stop the war.

God *created us for community*, and community is built into the fabric of creation. The Gospel text talks about a very basic relationship that creates and sustains community --marriage. This text talks about God's ideal intention for marriage; *and, yes, it can sound harsh to our ears.*

Adultery is usually defined *only* in terms of violating a marriage bond. Legally, throughout much of history, it has specifically meant violating the *man's* exclusive rights to the woman. Jesus transforms these meanings radically. Suddenly, adultery expands to include *all sorts of unfaithfulness in relationships.*

So, where the *outer* action is adultery, the *inner* action that Jesus spotlights is lust--the drive to take for yourself something that is *not yours to have*. Sexual relationships are the *specific example* of this desire, but so much of our culture is driven by the self-centered compulsion to control people and things. The clever and creative commercials, like those that we'll watch for during the Super Bowl today, are *all about* making us *want to want more and more.*

When the *inner desire to possess what belongs to someone else* expresses itself through adultery, it wounds the life-giving potential of faithful, trusting relationships. The results of such brokenness are heart-breaking. The wrenching pain of ruined relationships is not the way our loving God *wanted* it to be for us.

The various schools of rabbis had an ongoing disagreement over the interpretation of the law of Moses--it is written in Deuteronomy, chapter 24--that a man may divorce his wife "*if he finds in her indecency in anything.*" One group interpreted this to mean that only unfaithfulness could be the grounds for divorce. The other group stressed the words "in anything" and said that a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason at all. In Jewish law, the *woman could not divorce her husband*, but in the Roman law, a wife had *some* rights to initiate divorce. At any rate, that argument about divorce rules actually had more to do with how to get *around* the law rather than how to keep it. "*Looking for the loopholes*" does not really care for a fragile human community.

Community is built into the human creation; marriage is a basic building block of creative human community. Even as we know that marriage is *not the only human connection that helps us to be more authentically the persons that God would have us grow into being*, still we believe that marriage is intended to be a valuable gift. We wrestle with the most faithful and effective ways to strengthen and support marriage. Sin sticks around, and in this life, *no one can escape* that struggle. But, here's good news: we teach that Christians are forgiven sinners. Each and every day, each of us is "*saint and sinner*" always needing to lean on Jesus, and rely on God's grace.

Christians don't escape the brokenness of the world around us. Taking marriage too lightly weakens the web of human community. Yet some are trapped in marriages that are brutal. Years ago, I worked for a while in Minneapolis as an advocate in a battered women's shelter. Some women returned to relationships that put their lives in serious danger --all because they held to their marriage vows *more seriously* than they held to their basic identity as a *beloved child of God*. They did not realize that, in the brokenness, the most loving thing *they* could do was first to get to a safer place. Then, if possible, they might be able to call the abusing spouse to account for the damage that the violence has caused.

How do we deal with the reality of broken community, the effects of human hardness of heart? It is important to see how Jesus changes the focus from *legalistic wrangling* back to looking at *God's intention* for the law. If any of us wish to be judged on our keeping of the law, Jesus tells us that we had better keep the whole law, with our whole being--and not just ask what we can get away with. *If* you are counting on your own righteousness to save you, then please note that God demands perfection.

But speaking to us when we have fallen through the breaks in the web of human community—and we do, all the time—we can turn to Jesus, who always promises a word of grace. Jesus has become our brother and suffers *with* us and *for* us. Serving others as Jesus served is difficult, for there is the abandonment of Good Friday before there is the joy of Easter. God calls together a *new community* built on a new identity--brothers and sisters of Christ, redeemed children of God. We are created for community, and yet we suffer alienation and separation--*whether we are married or not*. On the cross, Jesus overcomes that separation--establishing and sustaining a community that suffers together and celebrates his presence together.

Moses says “*choose life*.” Jesus says, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life*.” Jesus *chooses us*, and makes a way to his life for us. We now can dare to look honestly into the heart, to confess and repent where we have fallen short of God's vision. We can receive with gratitude the grace to live as forgiven sinners, following Jesus, finding new community and new life on the way. Thanks be to God.

Salt and Light! Jesus tells us that his followers are salt and light for the world. Don't take these for granted-- if you have an ice storm forecast, you'll probably want to check your supply of *ice-melting salt* and maybe your *candles* too, so you'll have light in case the power goes out. Salt and light, pretty important resources.

When I used to work summers at a busy restaurant in my home town, some of the customers had figured out a good way to make sure that the French fries they got were piping hot. They would say that they needed to be salt-free. Normally, each batch of fries was salted by the cook when it was dumped into the big pan from which the individual servings were scooped. Then they could sit there for a while. "Salt-free" fries came right up out of the oil and onto the plate. So, what do you suppose the *first thing* that those customers did when they got their fries? Yup, you got it. They grabbed the salt shaker.

Food needs salt, in part because WE need salt. Before modern food preservation, people needed salt because food needed salt so it wouldn't spoil. When a patient needs fluids, the nurse will hang up a bag of "*normal saline solution*." Salt and water—they're a part of our life from the *amniotic fluid of the womb* to the *flowing tears at the tomb*.

The human need for salt has had quite a hand in shaping history. "Civilizations rose in Africa, China, India, and the Middle East around rich salt deposits. The appetite for salt pushed Phoenician trade ships into the Mediterranean Sea and camel caravans into the deserts of Africa and across the valley of the Euphrates River in the Middle East. At times, salt was traded at a value twice that of gold." Our word "*salary*" comes from the Latin word for salt -- Roman soldiers were often paid with valuable cakes of salt.

Jesus says his followers *are* the *salt of the earth*. Anything that was that important to day-to-day survival was bound to have some ceremonial importance too. The Israelites were required to include salt with all religious offerings. The word that Matthew uses to talk of salt "*losing its taste*" also means "*to be foolish*," a foolishness that comes when we turn away from God.

Jesus says we are the "*Salt of the earth*." Hmmm. What is a *pinch of salt* in the cookies, compared to all the *flour* and *shortening* or butter and *eggs* and other ingredients? What's a little sprinkle of salt on a whole plate of fries? What about all those surprisingly blessed people that Jesus commended in the section of his sermon that we looked at last week called The Beatitudes-- the *hungry*, the *excluded*, the *peacemakers*, the *poets*, and the *prophets*? Who are they -- who are *we*-- compared to all the powerful folks in the world, full of the world's presumptions and haughty displays of controlling power, full of pomp and circumstance? What are we compared to them?

We have developed modern substitutes for table salt -- though I'm thinking no one would ever say "*You are the 'Mrs. Dash' of the earth*." Pretty sure. . . We have ice-melting compounds that are not chemically salt, but for the life-sustaining "saltiness" of following Jesus, there is no substitute.

In our Christian life, being a pinch of God's salt can sometimes just *pinch*. Who, *me*? Our saltiness can be undermined by other loyalties. Like Isaiah's audience, with their short-sighted and self-centered "*taking care of number one*" as they turn their backs on the basic needs of fellow humans who are trampled in the process. Like the Corinthian congregation with their blindly self-righteous ego trips and factions. If we had been the "*good religious folks*" in the days of Jesus, we would probably have considered Pharisees the "*salt of the earth*," yet Jesus really puts the *pinch on their piety* here. They could be salt, --rubbed into the wounds of those who couldn't measure up. But Jesus says to the Pharisees, as Isaiah said to his hearers: *when you are just going through the motions, just doing things to actually serve yourself, it isn't enough. It just isn't enough, no matter how well you do it.* Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees-- if that's the game you're playing, you'd better do it right. And it isn't right.

The Pharisees believed that if people thoroughly kept the many demands of God's Law, God would be pleased and *that* would save the people. Jesus showed us that trusting in our own efforts and plans won't get us there, no matter how much we attempt to accomplish.

But here's good news for us: God says, you *are* salt, you *are* light. Not you "*should be*" salt, or you "*need to work harder at being*" light. You *are* salt, you *are* light. Of course, God does care about how we go about living our lives. As they say, God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbors do. As crucial as salt is to life, so our message of Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world is, well, crucial – that word that comes from the word cross, crucial. We are as *important as light* is to the plants and to the people who eat the *food* they provide. God keeps encouraging us to be what God has made us, and not to hide the light of our Gospel lamps. Let your light shine-- for it reflects Jesus, the light of the world.

We function as salt and light in the world when we respond to God's grace by living out the Law's command to *love God and to love our neighbor*. The "*righteousness that exceeds*" (verse 20) is not about crossing all the "t's" and dotting all the "i's" in order to promote our own cause. When we reach *beyond our own self* to the neighborhood and the world, then the Spirit works through us to fulfil God's righteousness, God's vision of a world where we love God above all else, and our neighbors as ourselves, and it shows.

The word translated "bushel basket" was a kind of bowl used like the bell on the end of the acolyte's candle lighter. You don't light the candles at the beginning of the service and then turn the lighter around right away and put them out. That would be dumb. Martin Luther King wrote that "*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*"

Because of Jesus at work in our life, we already ARE salt and light. Salt, when it is doing its rightful job, seasons and purifies and preserves -- *just because it is salt*. Light, when it shines out throughout the room, does what it is intended to do; it illuminates our way, it gives comfort, even courage. Don't think you can't make a difference, because you are *just* a pinch of salt, or *one* little candle. The writer Henri Nouwen shared that "*The great mystery of ministry is that while we ourselves are overwhelmed by our own weaknesses and limitations, we can still be so transparent that the Spirit of God, the divine counselor, can shine through us and bring light to others.*"

An old story tells of a wealthy businessman who was trying to decide which of his three nephews should succeed him in running the business. To help him decide, he gave each of the nephews four coins and showed them an empty storeroom. He told them to find something to buy with the coins that would fill the storeroom the most. They were to return at sunset. So, they hurried into the marketplace. And as the evening came, they made their way back home with their purchases and their plans.

One had bought a bale of straw, which covered the floor several inches deep. The second had bought a bag of thistledown which likewise covered the floor, several *more* inches deep. The third one said, "I gave *two coins* to a hungry child. I gave the *third coin* to the church. With the *fourth coin* I bought these." He struck a flint and lit a candle. Its *light* filled the whole storage room.

The Isaiah text that we heard this morning provides a lens for reading this week's Gospel. The light of Christ shines through us when we *do right by those who need us*, as Isaiah says, "*feeding the hungry, inviting those who are homeless into our homes, clothing the naked.*" We pray that the Spirit of Christ would encourage us let our lights shine, faithfully sharing in God's mission of steadfast love and healing for the broken world that God loves.

Even if we are no more than a *pinch of salt* to a *mountain of flour*, we are *empowered* by the Holy Spirit to be faithful to Jesus. Even if we are just a *shake of salt* in the soup, make us season your hungry world with the love of Christ. Even if we are just a few flickering candles in the darkness, make us shine with the light of God, the light that the *darkness* cannot overcome, the love that *hate* can never conquer. Shine through us, O Lord.

Walk Humbly with your God Micah 6: 1-8; Matthew 5: 1-12 Epiphany 4 Jan. 29, 2023

The long-running TV drama *Law and Order* always ends with a courtroom scene. In today's first lesson, there's a courtroom and ancient Israel is sitting in the defendant's chair. In this cosmic version of *Law and Order*, the mountains and hills witness the proceedings; the Lord God Almighty brings the complaint and will *also* be issuing the verdict.

Picture an ancient Israelite courtroom. Both parties "stood up together" and each would plead their own cases before the judge. In the prophet Micah's cosmic courtroom scene, the "mountains and hills" would have been witnesses to the making of the original promises of the covenant spelling out the relationship between God and God's people.

The bailiff announces the case: "Pay attention to what the Lord has to say: Listen, you *mountains*, to the Lord's case. Hear this, you *foundations* of the earth, for the Lord is bringing a law-suit against his people, and will be arguing the case against them."

My people, [imagine the rumbling *voice of God*--sounding a lot like James Earl Jones] *just what did I do to you?* After all, I *led* you out of bondage in Egypt, and I gave you leaders; Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to lead you through the wilderness. That was *my* doing. For you. Remember how you crossed the Jordan River safely into the Promised Land? I did these things to save you.

The people hear again about God's powerful saving acts for them. Shittim is a grove of acacia trees on the Plain of Moab, just east of the Jordan River, where the people of Israel camped just before they crossed over into their Promised Land. It was where Moses gave his farewell sermon, which the Biblical book of Deuteronomy recounts. Gilgal is the spot where they camped after they had crossed. The Moabites were neighbors of Israel, sometimes shaky *allies*, sometimes *enemies*. Balak was the king of Moab, who hired Balaam--a professional curse-maker, to do his thing against the children of Abraham, these Israelites. But, amazingly, instead of curses, out came words of blessing instead. God's blessing.

The defendant answers—*what* can I bring with me when I answer to *God on high*? Should I come with my *paycheck*, or my *whole retirement* account? Will God be pleased with *bushel baskets* of diamonds or a *mountain* of gold? Should I invite God to strike my *first-born child* dead in return for my shame? Ahh. *It's hopeless. I'm busted.*

The prophet Micah gives God's straightforward answer to the question, "*just what does God want from us anyway?*" "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." So, let's unpack that a bit.

Do justice: this is more than simply inflicting the right punishment to fit the crime. This justice actively seeks to put things right; looking for ways to help others be able to have what they need to live full and whole lives. It means keeping the 10 Commandments --putting God first and always at the center, respecting authority and using it responsibly, not stealing or lying or killing or defaming another person. *These things, yes.* But when Martin Luther wrote his Catechism, which explained the *meaning* of those Commandments, he detailed the shape of "*doing justice.*" In every case, he tells us that we honor God when we *actively* seek out ways to help our neighbors, protecting their relationships, their property, their good name, and their life. This is what "*doing justice*" looks like.

Love kindness: English doesn't have any simple way to translate this Hebrew word "*Hesed*." Other places it is "steadfast love," or "lovingkindness." We might say that if "doing justice" *protects life*; then "loving kindness" *redeems life*. The good news for the people of ancient Israel was that God had chosen them, an unlikely bunch, to be God's own people. God made a holy covenant with them, promising "*I will be your God, and you will be my people*." God saved them, gave them an identity, cared for them, forgave them, and promised always to be with them. To "love kindness" is to be loyal to God and the promises God has made, and to remember and respond with gratitude for God's grace.

Walk humbly with your God: This puts it all into practice, day by day. God doesn't leave us sitting on the sidelines. The walk is "with God." We don't determine the direction of this journey, *God does*. And it is a "humble" walk. The Bible tells us that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, so that no human being would boast in the presence of God. Walk humbly--as St. Paul says, *if you're going to boast, boast about Jesus and the victory won for us on the cross; the cross, that most humble walk of all*.

In walking humbly with God, in doing justice, in honoring and being loyal to our baptism promises, the *world* will not think that we are particularly blessed. But Jesus announces God's surprising blessedness in today's Gospel lesson.

Blessed are the poor in spirit: those who are not relying on their own devices, but let go and simply depend on God; those who *carry the sharp enduring* pain of loss; the *meek*, ignored, bullied, scorned; those who *hunger and thirst for righteousness*- gifted with the burden of perpetually seeing the pain of unrighteousness and seeking for the right to be restored—and often merely dismissed as malcontents, mere do-gooders. *Peacemakers* get shut out, shot at, and shot down. *Nobody* wants to be counted among the *persecuted*. And we ask, "is this where we see God's blessings abide?" We can count on the promise of God's blessing when we find ourselves there.

What do all of these blessed ones have in common? Each one has given up trying to control God, given up trying to manipulate their lives and others' to make them come out the way they *think* they should. In every case, they have given up on trying to *be* God, without giving up *on* God. They can walk "humbly" because they trust God's promises.

God does not read out the actual charges in this lesson--other parts of the book of Micah give the details: exploitation of the poor by the rich, economic fraud, using false scales--like a merchant pressing his thumb on the scale along with the sliced turkey. Like off-shore bank accounts and fishy balance sheets, like insider trading and influence peddling.

The prophet Micah cautions God's people that failure to keep the ongoing covenant responsibilities of love and justice cannot be overcome by just going through the motions at the Temple, or in church. The speaker who answers for the people must finally plead guilty. "*Should I give my own first-born child to make up for my sin?*" The defendant in God's lawsuit discovers that *nothing*, not even *such a sacrifice*, can make up for going their own way against God.

But then God does the sort of thing that only *God* can do: our expectations get turned upside down. It happens in *each* of today's lessons. The people confess their guilt; acknowledge the shame of breaking covenant with God, the source of their life. God remained faithful to that covenant and they were not. Yet God doesn't pass through the people, inflicting death. God "passes over" them, giving instead *his own* first-born son, granting life-giving forgiveness of our failures. It is the foolish wisdom of the cross, God's amazing upside-down surprise.

God *chose* what is *foolish* in the world to shame the *wise*. Jesus is our wisdom, our righteousness, our new life. Blessed?! The wisdom of this world surely continues to scoff at this nonsense. Yet, Jesus announces good news for the "*poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers.*" God reverses expectations--we guilty ones look for a way to make good on our own, or perhaps we despair over *ever* being able to put the pieces back together again. But although we can rightly expect *punishment*, we get *grace* instead. We expect a crushing blow—like our own first-born offered up-- we get, instead, *God's* first-born, offered for us. What a gracious, glorious exchange!

The verdict in God's courtroom when Jesus is standing by us is forgiveness, offering new hope and new life. The outcome is God's approval, for Jesus' sake. And God does not *leave* us there at the defendant's table. The Judge sends us on our way with these words: "*Do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*" We do not venture out alone, for God's Spirit gives us resources and companions for our walk with God. We are blessed and we can pass on the blessing, no matter what may happen. You are forgiven; you are loved; you are blessed. Live guided by justice and mercy, and carry the light of Christ's love and forgiveness as you walk humbly each day with God.

Transitions and Transformations 1 Corinthians 10: 1-5; Matthew 4: 12-23
 Epiphany 3A January 22, 2023

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is in a time of transition. He leaves his hometown and begins his public ministry. A moment full of *hope*, and, as the lesson reminds us, a world full of *danger*.

Matthew's gospel tells us that, as a child, *Jesus and his parents* had to *flee* from King Herod, from *Bethlehem to Egypt*; and then, after *that* murderous King Herod died, they could not return to Bethlehem, because Herod's violent son ruled in his place. So they went on to Nazareth, in Galilee.

Jesus begins his work after hearing that John the Baptist has been arrested by King Herod Antipas. I don't know about you, but hearing about John's arrest might be *just* the moment when I would decide *carpentry* was indeed my calling, after all. But, *no*. In precisely this dangerous moment, Jesus begins preaching and gathering his followers.

In today's lesson, we hear about the response of two sets of brothers, Andrew and Simon Peter, and James and John to the call from Jesus to "follow me." Last week, we learned that at least two of these men had been disciples of John the Baptist, so they already knew something about Jesus. But we have here the *decisive* moment for those brothers: Jesus called, and they "*left what they were doing and followed him immediately*."

We are also called to be our Lord's agents of a new way of living *in* the world, shaped and directed by God's love *for* the world. Called to keep on casting the net of that love out into our hurting world. We too live in transition times, between *what has been* and *what will be*, between *despair and hope*, between *hate and love*, between the power of *sin, death and the devil*, and the *resurrection power of Jesus*: God's transformation power, confronting oppressive powers that deal out *down-payments on death*.

We have been placed on God's transition team at our baptism, and through the Holy Spirit, transition can lead to transformation. God's work of transformation calls on us to respond to decisive moments. Sometimes the angels cheer our responses, and sometimes not so much. That's when each of us can remember that Christ has made a "*decision for me*" and continues to cast out that net of forgiveness. The writer Anne Lamott says "*God loves me just the way I am*." But she adds, "*and God loves me too much to let me stay this way*." That's why the gospel of Matthew always expects repentance, a change of mind and heart and life, as the response to hearing the good news that the reign of *God* has come near.

I've read that Averill Harriman, who was a frequent United States diplomatic representative to conferences in Europe, was asked about his command of the French language. He smiled and responded, "Oh, it's fine; -- except for the verbs, of course." *Not fine*. When it comes to *living out our faith*, this is often where we find ourselves. We try to describe God, and debate ideas about righteousness--our *nouns and adjectives* get a workout. But Jesus calls us to commitment. Faithfulness includes much more from us than *just thinking or believing* the right way. It calls on us to pay attention to the *action words*— the verbs— the risky business of following Jesus, loving and caring about what Jesus loves and cares about.

What does it take to put *action into our faith*, to put the *verbs* into our response to God's claim on our life? Jesus announces a call to *shift our loyalties to God's way* of being together in this world, the way we encounter in the *life of the suffering servant Jesus*. It can be difficult, in the course of our everyday lives, to decide *where our true loyalties lie and how that should affect the decisions that we make*. It's so easy to be torn, distracted. Having divided loyalties can be very dangerous. During the *War Between the States*, there was a farmer who didn't want to risk taking one side or the other, so he wore a Confederate shirt and Union pants. And, wouldn't you know it, the *Confederate* soldiers shot at his *pants*, and the *Union* soldiers shot at his *shirt*. That feels a bit like watching the news these days.

Jesus calls the disciples from their fishing nets, sending them to fish for people from now on. We might think that such a call goes only to *pastors or missionaries*, not *ordinary folks like me*. Those brothers who responded to Jesus' call probably *did not entirely abandon their occupations* when they answered the call of Jesus, however. We hear about them in the gospels, out fishing—in the boats, nets cast out for fish. God calls *us* too, *where we are*, and God works with *who we are* and *what we have been given*, in the context of our *day-to-day life*, whatever and wherever that may be. If *fishermen* are called to start fishing for people—then what image would Jesus use in your calling?

We are people called and equipped to *do the fishing*, but we are also the fish to be caught. Jesus calls on us to repent, because we resist that net that drags us up from the depths of our self-centered ways and into the light of God's grace. And what lies at the core of that resistance? A commentator named Brian Stoffregen puts it like this: *Repentance properly understood is an "I can't" experience rather than an "I can" experience. If repentance is promising God, "I can do better," then we are trying to keep ourselves in control of our lives. If we can do better enough, we don't need a gracious God, only a patient One.* Only when we throw our "turned-in-on-ourselves" lives onto the mercy of God does that repentance result in a different way of acting, "as we allow God to do what we can't do ourselves -- namely to raise the dead."

Repentance is not just feeling bad about something in the past: that is only the *first step*. Changing attitudes about what's happening in the present can transform the direction of our future. When we hang our hearts on Jesus, we are trusting that *his* death makes our resurrection life possible, the net that hauls us up into the light.

When Jesus called James and John, the sons of Zebedee, they were, quote, "mending their nets." This might seem to be an insignificant detail. After all, fishermen have to mend their nets. Nets with *big* holes in them are not a good thing for fishing. The fish escape through the holes and swim away. But Matthew uses an interesting word here. The word for "mending" is the Greek verb *katartidzo*, which basically means "*thoroughly preparing something to meet demands*." Be prepared. Mend your nets.

There's a connection here with our second lesson. What you can't know from reading an English translation is that Paul uses the exact same word, *katartidzo*, to describe the challenge facing the Corinthians. The Church in Corinth was divided into factions. There was the "*Paul*" group; the "*Apollos*" group; the "*Cephas*" group; and so on. They were all so busy running

around trying to one-up each other that they were ripping holes in the Corinthian community. Poor Paul. You can almost hear him begging. “Now I *appeal* to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *be united* in the same mind and the same purpose.”

The Greek word Paul uses for “being united,” is *katartidzo*, the very same word that Matthew uses to refer to mending nets. And the noun form (*katartismos*) is used in Ephesians 4:12 concerning “*equipping*” the saints-- “*Be thoroughly prepared to meet the demands of ministry.*” Paul says to the Corinthians: “*Resolve those differences that get in the way of God’s purposes. Mend your nets.*” A healthy church knows that there’s no fishing without some mending. Our true unity comes only from being *tied together into the death and life of Jesus Christ*, celebrating the work of God’s Spirit in us and among us, *activating a transformational love* for God and for our neighbor, no matter what our *transitions* bring.

God promises that the light has begun to dawn. *We don’t make the dawn happen.* It is a gift, God’s gift of light for us shining in Jesus. *May your love, O Lord, light up our lives with hope and the courage to repent where we have fallen short of your vision for us, to daily turn our lives to you as we recommit to the ministry that you have shown us in the person of Jesus Christ. Give us courage and wisdom, energy and grace to follow you -- so that our transitions are truly transformations in your love.*

“Look --the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” There, it has started. John the Baptist spreads the Good News, there in the wilderness at the water’s edge, sharing what the Spirit of God had given him. He tugs on our sleeves too: Look! *This is the one!* God is here -- to be with us, to heal the hurting world. Jesus is beginning his ministry, and here he invites his first disciples to “come and see.” This good news drops into this world like a pebble in a pond, and from that moment, the ripples keep on spreading through time and space.

Jesus asks these curious disciples of John, “*what are you looking for?*” On the surface, this is a polite “*can I help you?*” But the question also goes deeper: “What are you looking for? Is something missing in your life?” Jesus asks *us* this question, and he invites *us* to “*come and see.*” The ripples of the good news continue to spread out into our world.

Jesus invited the disciples to follow him so they could “*come and see*” this powerful new thing that God was bringing to the world. “Come and See.” In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first book of the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, four young siblings are sent into the countryside during the World War II bombing of London. The day after their arrival, the children are stuck in the house because of a rainstorm. They decide to explore. It is Lucy, the youngest, who discovers a sort of magic closet, a wardrobe that leads her to Narnia. At the beginning of chapter 3, Lucy *returns* from Narnia and finds the other children *playing*; they barely noticed that she’d been gone. Lucy tries to *convince* the others to come with her but *they aren’t buying it*. Finally in frustration, Lucy says, “No, Peter, I’m not [making it up]. It’s a magic wardrobe. There’s a wood inside it, and it’s snowing, and there’s a Faun, and a witch and it’s called *Narnia*; *come and see!*”

Eventually each of the children enters Narnia and the tale unfolds from there. They had to *follow* little Lucy; they had to have faith to leave their familiar ordinary world and walk through that magic closet into the land of Narnia. *Come and See*. They found what they were looking for, and much, much more. So, what are *you* looking for? Jesus invites us to “come and see” what our hearts are yearning for.

The Gospel of John is jam-packed with layers of meaning as it tells the story of Jesus. One key to mining its riches is to pay *attention to the language* John uses, and to the way he *puts the story together*. Notice: The soon-to-be disciples *begin* by addressing Jesus as “Rabbi”-- *teacher*, a title of respect, but not unusual. They *end up* calling him Messiah.” They have begun to see that *Jesus* could be the one they had been looking for, chosen by God to deal with the world’s broken dreams and fractured relationships. A light to *all the nations*. Andrew shared the news with his brother Simon Peter. From the pebble drop of Andrew’s initial witness, we can already see ripples begin to spread.

“*Come and See*” – well, *easier said than done*. Often we are not clear as to *where* God is leading us, or *why*, or *what* we should be looking for. Even before we can begin to see any results, God invites us to come along -- just as little Lucy invited her sister and brothers into the land of Narnia. We can trust God’s promise to lead and guide.

I read about a speedboat driver who had survived a racing accident. He said that he had been near top speed when his boat veered slightly and hit a wave at a *dangerous angle*. The combined force of the speed and the size and angle of the wave sent the boat spinning crazily in the air. He was thrown from his seat and propelled deeply into the water--so deep, in fact, that he had *no idea* which direction the surface was. He had to remain calm and *wait* for the buoyancy of his life vest to begin pulling him up. Once he discovered which way was *up*, he could swim for the surface.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of change, *anxious* or *afraid*, surrounded by confusing options, too deeply into our predicaments to know “*which way is up*.” When this happens, we too can remain calm, waiting for God’s gentle tug to pull us in the proper direction. Our buoyant life vest may be the prayers and support of other Christians; it may be wrestling with Scripture, quiet time in prayer, or some other Spirit sign. The key is recognizing that we must depend on God, and trusting God to work in sometimes *new*, *surprising*, and often *unsettling* ways. *You* may be God’s life vest for someone else, so pay attention for opportunities to let *others* experience the love of God at work through your life and your invitation to “come and see.”

Yes, sometimes we get discouraged like Isaiah did. Isaiah knew his calling to be God’s prophet, Isaiah knew his message, and Isaiah was assured that he had been given the gifts from God that he needed, *but he still got discouraged*. So did the prophets Moses and Jeremiah, the writers of the Psalms, the apostle Paul, and even Jesus. Should *we* be *surprised* that there are times when we are a little shaky?

We honor Dr. Martin Luther King this week. This modern prophet predicted that he would be killed for his message, but that it *didn’t matter* to him because “He had been to the mountain top.” Like Moses, he had seen the vision of a promised land of freedom from bigotry and bondage. But Dr. King somehow knew he would not live long enough to see it come to pass. That “mountain top” speech was powerful -- it *still* is powerful. But not many knew that after these mighty words, King had to be *helped off* the platform. No one said there would *not* be moments of discouragement in the path of following Jesus. *No one said there would not be a cross*.

In those discouraging moments, we can rely on this: God is the one who invites us into this new journey; the Holy Spirit leads us on this road. God continues to love and care about the mission that we are *called and equipped to carry out in the name of Jesus* – challenged by God to keep the ripples of good news going as we reach out and invite others to “come and see” what God is up to.

Near the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus is praying for everyone who believes through the Word as it ripples out to neighbors, family, friends, and co-workers, spreading through the world, throughout time, a great wave of sharing and caring as we navigate the deep waters of our lives. God promises to sustain us no matter what uncertainties and disappointments bug us and bog us down.

When Jesus asked the disciples “*what are you looking for*,” they gave what might seem like an odd answer. They ask Jesus, “*where are you staying*?” And Jesus says, *Come and See*. Well, it

was late, and on one level it was like he was simply inviting them to come on over, we'll have supper and talk a while, and we'll haul out the hide-a-bed if you need a place to sleep.

But, on *another level*, they were asking Jesus "*where do you abide?*" The word John uses for "*staying*" is "*Meno*" – often translated "abide." The Holy Spirit "remains -- abides" on Jesus. In faith, we abide in Jesus. Later in the Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who '*abide*' in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." *Come and see* – see that I will stand by those who follow me, and they will bear fruit for me.

John the Baptist shares his testimony, and it spreads. From this witness, Jesus gets Andrew, his first disciple. Andrew then took the message to Simon Peter. They told their friends, and their friends continued to spread the word. Jesus invites them to "*come and see*," and, having seen, they "*go and tell*." And because *they* shared the word, *we* are gathered here this morning.

God calls us to *come and see*, and equips us to *go and tell*. We have a message to share. We have been found by Jesus and Jesus invites us to "*stick with him*." When we abide in Jesus, we will find what our hearts have yearned for, as our hearts are led to yearn for the transformational love of God. We can abide there, as we "*come and see*," and as we "*go and tell*."