

March 10, 2024
4th Sunday in Lent
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Christ Church Exeter

In Spite Of

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace, you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.
Ephesians 2:1-10

Children are known to ask some of the clearest and more complex questions when it comes to God. Parents and grandparents and Sunday School teachers always have to be on the ball. There are the big basic ones: Who made God? What is God like? Why can't I see God? There are always questions about life and heaven: Where did Granma go when she died? When the answer is heaven with God, then children often want to ask who else gets in. Their pets are first on their mind. Did our beloved golden retriever go to heaven?

As they grow, children might want more detailed answers: Can God make mistakes? Will God forgive me when I make a mistake? I mean a really big mistake! Why does the dark make me so afraid? Is there really a devil or is that all made up? And as children try to understand the meaning of the crosses in our churches and what happened on the Friday before all of the chocolate eggs and bunnies on Easter Sunday: why did God let Jesus die on a cross?

To that last question we could have at our ready the familiar gospel verse we hear again this morning. John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And we know there's more to it than one Bible verse...

Children's questions not only make us think on our feet but also consider our own worldview and theology. The big things: life and death. Good and evil.

At our best, what parents, elders and teachers try to do with children and young minds is to create a foundation rich and strong enough so that they can make sense of the world and make sound moral decisions for themselves.

Some months ago, I had a conversation about faith and religion with someone who is a point in their life when some deep questions had surfaced. They were trying to fill in some of the missing gaps and seeing if there is a place for them within so-called 'institutional religion.' It is a question many are asking today, as the "Nones" – those identifying with no particular church or religion – are fast growing in numbers in our country and Western Europe.

I found myself explaining how what we do and profess today is based on a structure and a framework of belief that goes back many centuries. I agreed that it is not always easy to translate the ancient world into today's challenges.

Yet the only way we can begin to know the heart of the God no one has ever seen, is to the read the stories told by those who came before us who wanted to express how this God created the universe and a become a presence in their lives.

We can point to the prayers that have sung and prayed more than all others in the psalms. These are part of the foundation we stand upon.

Psalm 107

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, *
and his mercy endures for ever.

21 Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy *
and the wonders he does for his children.

22 Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving *
and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.

In these short verses we build an architecture of believing in a God who is good and merciful and our way to give thanks is through joy. A faith and religion in general that leaves little room for joy and celebration and giving is not one that inspires me.

And believers in ancient times and today need a framework to work all of this through.

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul lays out in six chapters the core message of the gospel and how it should shape our lives.

He shows the movement from being spiritually dead to being fully alive.

Let's unpack it a bit this morning.

First, "God, rich in mercy, out of great love, loved us in spite of our sin."

I'll often hear the phrase that someone did something to another person – forgive that person for example – not because of what the other did or whether they deserved or earned forgiveness but 'in spite' of what they may have done.

The mercy part of God we see in the psalm, but how do we see our way through “loved us in spite of our sin.”

When we tell our faith story, the beginning scene is the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve. And whoever is to blame for what went wrong, humanity is tossed out of paradise.

When Jesus arrives on the scene, humanity is in desperate need of a bridge back to what was. We think of this as reconciliation with God. The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had laid out the foundation, David and Solomon created a royal kingdom and built the Temple, the great prophets remained faithful even as so many fell away, and everyday ordinary believers continued throughout to offer prayers in the hope that a Messiah would come to complete the story of return.

When I'm asked where to start reading the Bible, I often discourage starting on page 1 with Genesis, largely because the Bible is not like a novel or any other kind of book. Start in the gospels I recommend – Luke is my favorite – and meander through the psalms. In time though the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament are the only way to shine a light on the why of Christ.

I take no great delight in basking in my sinfulness. But I know some self-reflection can help me see more clearly a better way to be and live.

I know that too much talk of sin in church today can turn off those seeking for a more compassionate understanding of God. And at the same time, whatever we want to call it, human beings have a capacity to love, and turn away from love. To give of ourselves, or to hold back. To heal, or to hurt or wound. To receive or to reject. To build up or tear down.

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

Our tradition points to how God loves us even when we lived in darkness.

Darkness can simply be a way to describe not able to see what is before – the good in the world and the light that is coming.

It can be a very natural thing to feel that we do not deserve something we have received.

Who has never felt unworthy or undeserving – even for a short while -- to receive all that God has given us?

It might be better expressed in song:

This honest uncomfortable truth compelled John Newton to give the world the timeless hymn:

Amazing Grace how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

The language of unworthiness that is part of tradition is more about pointing to the otherness of God, the mystery of God, than it is to make us feel small and insignificant. The message of the gospel is again about closing the gap between us and God.

v. 6 By grace you have been saved and raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

I get how those of us living today we might not picture God sitting up in heaven with Jesus right next to him, but for those who in lived in Jesus' day the heavenly seating arrangement was no small matter. It was about location and access and importance.

Our collect for today we prayed: Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world.

Paul's message that we too get that same access and proximity to God because of Christ. We are picked up and seated close.

For me, I go back to memories of large family meals at my grandparents' house in Ohio. This may be familiar to some of you. The dining room table was for all the adults, and the children present sat around a card table at the edge of the room. It was close enough for the grownups to keep an eye on us yet far enough removed so that they could have grownup conversations. As we got older, some of us graduated to the larger adult table to take our place.

I am reminded again and again of the wisdom of the Franciscan priest Gregory Boyle who works with gang members in Los Angeles who said, "I don't need God to be charge of my life. I only need God to be at the center of it."

Finally, "For we are what God has made us."

That could be one of more liberating verses in the New Testament.

It reminds me of the collect for Ash Wednesday that began Lent: God you hate nothing you have made.

We can spend a lifetime thinking through what this could mean.

It could move us closer to acceptance, maybe the hardest work of spirituality. Accepting who we are, what gifts we have to make the world a more Christ-like world.

Accepting that we are loved BECAUSE – and in spite – of who we are from our first breath to our last.