

The Dark Valley: Demanding Miracles

Greeting: Tear your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord for he is merciful and compassionate. God is very patient and full of faithful love. The Lord our God is always ready to forgive. (*Joel 2*)

Prayer: Lord, your mercy is always upon us. Be gracious to all those who have strayed from your ways and welcome them once again into your love. Lift us up so that we may always turn to you with repentant hearts and may embrace you in faith. Help us to hold to the eternal truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son, who with you and the Holy Spirit live and reign as one God, forevermore. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 91

The You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.
(Psalm 91 NRSV*)

We read the words of Psalm 91 and hear of God's saving grace. That God watches over us and cares for us. That God is there to answer us when we call out to him. What does it mean to you to turn to God? Do you place your trust in the Lord no matter what happens? What exactly does it mean for us to trust in God? How do we let others know about God's faithfulness? How do we share in the blessings that come from following the Lord? How do you share in the love and faithfulness that Christ has shown you?

(Joys & Prayer Concerns)

Prayer: Lord, we turn to you now in prayer. We come before you with the celebrations of the joys in our lives. We come before you with the troubles of our hearts. We look to you in all things that your steadfast love may guide and lead us. Help us in our doubts and worries and strengthen us in faith, through Jesus Christ, our faithful redeemer. May we find peace and grace through that same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture reading for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Luke chapter 4 verses 1 through 13.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:1-13 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

So, for Lent this year I wanted to do a series on some of the ways that we cope with the difficulties of life, with our grief, our heartache, and our loss because some of these things are the things that put our faith through the greatest stress, and they are the things that can make us lose sight of God. And they're the things that can make us give up hope. Sometimes when we enter that dark valley we don't know how to get out. And sometimes it's because of the way that we think about things. And for today's message, I wanted to look at this idea of demanding a miracle because our scripture reading today helps us to understand that idea. We know the familiar story that begins Lent. Jesus goes out into the wilderness and for 40 days he fasts and was tempted by the devil. We get three temptations in our reading today. That the first is to turn a stone into bread. If you're hungry perform a miracle and eat. The response is that we don't live by bread alone. Feeding the physical body doesn't feed the spiritual. And so, the devil takes Jesus up and shows him all the world and offers to give him authority over everything. But only if Jesus will worship the devil. And the reply is that we should worship God alone and serve only him. Now, it's this next one that really gets to the heart of the message today. They end up on top of the temple. Devil tells Jesus that if he is the Son of God, then he should jump. And he backs it up with quoting Scripture. The Bible says God will command his angels to protect you and lift you up so that you won't even knock your foot against a stone. Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it, right? Not so fast. Jesus answers by quoting Scripture as well. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." So, the Devil departs. Now, the reason this last question struck me is because the temptation here is to demand a miracle because scripture says you'll get it. But the answer was don't try to test God.

Now, I don't know if most people think fully about what that reply means. Because there's a lot happening in this little exchange, especially with this last temptation. If we try to put ourselves in that same situation and think we are on the Empire State Building and somebody says "jump, God will save you." I'm going to say no. It's not that I don't trust God. It's that God gave me sense enough to know not to jump off the Empire State Building. Right? But what happens when we try to think about this and other situations where it's not so obvious? And this is where it becomes difficult. Because the temptation isn't just about jumping from a high place. The temptation is in forcing God's hand to perform a miracle. Demanding a miracle

because it's what you want. And this gets really difficult when we start putting it into other situations. Like when someone is terminally ill, and we pray for miraculous healing. When someone has been in a terrible accident, and we pray for a miracle to get them through. When a relationship has fallen apart and is over, and we pray that God intervene with a miracle to make everything all right. The problem we run into with all of those situations is that they are in essence the same thing as jumping off the tall building and saying, "catch me." The reason that they are is because in each instance we're saying "God, I need you to do my will. I need you to change everything to be how I want it." The problem is that we don't dictate to God how things go. Because we don't know anything beyond what we can see.

I know this situation all too well because it caused a crisis of faith and my own early life. An unanswered prayer made me think that God had turned his back on me. I had demanded a miracle from God. And it took me some time to come to terms with the fact that God had never walked away from me. I had walked away from God. Because God had never demanded a miracle from me. I had demanded a miracle from God. As I got older, I began to realize what I wanted was just that. It was simply my wish. This was complicated by the fact that I started to think about how other prayers might not have matched my own. But that's hard for us to think about when we are in that dark valley. When that shadow comes over us and we so desperately want what we want it can be hard to get out again. But the thing is, God doesn't just walk away and leave us on our own. God's still there but God knows more than we do. And as I've pointed out before, if God stepped in with the miracle for everything in our lives, our lives wouldn't be our lives at all. It would mean that there was no free will because it would mean God would micromanage our lives to the point that we wouldn't do anything at all, not even respond to God's call.

The other thing that really struck me was that it wasn't fair of me to demand that God do my will just because I gave into temptation and wanted what I wanted. And that can be hard when it's over something big like life and death. Because then it's all too easy to be blinded by what we want. Because we can't see how any other way could ever be alright. But that's just the thing. We can't see. We can't know. And it can quickly become a cascade of difficult thought. Especially if we begin to think that every time something good happened it's a miracle and every time something bad happens it's an unanswered prayer. Because life happens. But

we have to remember that Christ is there to help us to live life. Not to avoid it or to get around it but to live it. And to have life abundantly. Christ isn't there to fix all of the things that can happen in our lives. Christ is there to help us to live them, to get through them, and to cope with the hardships. But Christ is also there to remind us of the good things in life. Sometimes we lose sight of that because we get so focused on how we think things should be. And we lose sight of the fact that we are still here, and we still have a life to live.

But main thing I wanted to get across today is that when we demand miracles, we aren't trusting God. We're telling God that we know how to do his work better than he does. When we want to force a miracle, we're saying that we know how things should go that we know better than Christ. That we are on the same level as God. Can anyone here say to me they are better than God? Can you tell me that you are holier than Christ? The thing is, if we trust God, we trust that God will get us through whatever happens, and that God will help us to keep living. Not that God will bow to our every whim, but that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. That no matter how difficult that may feel, trusting that God will help us to live is better than thinking that we know better than God. We have to trust in God's love. We have to trust in God's grace. We have to trust that Christ will always be with us. Because God will still be there to comfort us to guide us and lead us even in those times of darkness. We have to have faith that we are never alone, and we are never abandoned. We just have to have that trust and have faith that whatever happens we are still in the hands of a loving and merciful Savior. No matter what happens, God is with us. Always and forever. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.