

## **Has Come Near**

Depths of Love: Part 1 “Has Come Near”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – February 18, 2024

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

**Readings:** Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

**Reflection:** Psalm 25

**Greeting:** All we like sheep have gone astray, we have all turned to our own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He bore our sins and made intercession for us all.

**Prayer:** O Heavenly Father, be with us in these forty days. Help us to remember how your blessed Son was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. May we recall how he was tempted to be an example as we face temptation ourselves. May we learn and grow as we follow Christ in this journey to the cross. Be gracious to all who have gone astray and bring them with penitent hearts and steadfast faith back into your fold. May we hold fast to your great love, as demonstrated through devotion and sacrifice by Jesus Christ your Son, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 25

*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord! Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. (Psalm 25 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 25, and we hear of putting our trust in the Lord. That God is our refuge and our salvation. That we have forgiveness in the love of our Heavenly Father. What can you do to grow in that love in these forty days of Lent? In what ways can you extend the forgiveness we find in Christ to others? Who will you be lifting up in your prayers as you remember God’s faithfulness? What are you learning as we journey with Christ to the cross? How can we explore the depths of love we find in Christ as part of Lent?

**Prayer:** Almighty God, you are with us in the deepest depths of our hearts and the smallest thoughts in our minds. Your steadfast love and faithfulness have been shown to us in the example set by Jesus Christ our Lord. We turn to you in this time of reflection with the celebrations that we have spoken aloud. We come before you with the worries we have voiced out loud. But we also come before you with the silent pleading from within. The joys and the worries we hold are all before you. Help us to know your mercy and grace so that we may know you are with us in our triumph and our defeat. May we always find our way back to you through our laughter and our tears. May our love for you grow day by day, and may we love each other as a sign of the love we find through 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 readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading is from Genesis chapter 9, verse 8 through 17.

*Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth." (Genesis 9:8-17 NRSV\*)*

Our next reading is from 1 Peter chapter 3, verses 18 through 22.

*For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight lives, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. (1 Peter 3:18-22 NRSV\*)*

Our final reading is from Mark chapter 1, verses 9 through 15.

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:9-15 NRSV\*)*

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

As we begin Lent, I wanted to start with a few different ideas to set us up for the coming weeks and the way that we will be exploring this journey to the cross. Last Sunday, I said something that brought a few questions. Because I asked about what you might be giving up for Lent or if you might be starting something new. So, part of what I wanted to touch on was why we are giving things up for Lent and why I think starting something new is just as good. All too often we have things that we do because they are what we have always done, but we don't always make the connection with why we are doing it. And that can happen with Lent. So, I wanted to get into some of the reasoning behind what we do. A big part of that is what we have in our short reading from Mark. And thought it may be short, it starts something massive, and because of that it is the focus for today. Now, Mark gives us the shortest of the Gospel accounts of Jesus in the wilderness. But I thoroughly enjoy Mark because of that. I like how Mark draws us in and then is ready to move right along. And you might recognize this from a few weeks ago, as part of this reading was the beginning of our series on the Holy Spirit. We have the baptism of Christ by John. But then Jesus is driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, and he is there for forty days. Mark says three things about this trip to the wilderness. While Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days, he is tempted by Satan, with the wild beasts, and angels waited on him. Once Mark gives us this information, we are ready to hear the message that Jesus began his public ministry with. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

This is quite the transition, as it leaves us with many questions. But it does give us everything we need to know. At first you might ask what all this has to do with giving up something for Lent. We see Jesus being driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. It is here that he prepares for public ministry. It is there that he is separated from everything and everyone while he prepares to go out and preach the good news. It is here that he faces the fact that once this begins, it ends with death on a cross. Mark leaves it up to our imagination with what that experience was. How Jesus is tempted to see if he is ready for this journey. How he is there in the wilderness. And when he is ready, angels wait on him so that he begins with strength and confidence. It is these forty days in the wilderness that we think of in our forty days of Lent. If you read Matthew or Luke, you will notice that they give more detail, but I think Mark says everything that we need to know. He is giving just the important details. Jesus is

baptized and the Holy Spirit descends. The Spirit then drives him into the wilderness to prepare. When he is ready, he begins his ministry. When he is ready, his journey to the cross starts. Now, if you picked up the Lenten reading plan on your way in or if you have downloaded it earlier, you may notice that the forty days do not include Sundays. If we remember Jesus struggling in the wilderness when we give up something for Lent, we can remember Jesus being waited on by angels on our Sunday rest. These forty days are our own time of preparation for ministry.

Part of what I wanted to talk about today is one of the dangers that we can run into with giving things up for Lent. We think about Jesus fasting in the wilderness and what he is giving up to be ready to proclaim that the Kingdom has come near. We think about the sacrifice that is made from the depths of love on the cross. All too quickly though we can start to wonder if what we are giving up will measure up to Christ. What will put us on equal footing with Jesus in Lent? I say this with love, but you can't. I would not expect any of you to be Christ. I do not expect you to equal what Christ has done for all of us. And that is not what we are called to do in Lent. Sometimes we push ourselves into trying to find something to give up and it becomes a burden that never draws us closer to God. We are called to remember what has been done for us. We are called to remember the journey to the cross with somber reverence. That Lent is a time for us to remember the pain felt and the struggle with temptation that continues to this day. That we remember depths of God's love made clear in Christ's journey to the cross and what it means for us. The reason we have this focus is because this somber remembrance helps to prepare our hearts for the celebration that is Easter. Because we have to understand the depths of that love that has come near and to grasp that sorrow in order to understand why there is so much joy. We approach the sorrow of the crucifixion in order to fully experience the joy of the resurrection. And our other readings today help us to think about that journey. We remember our baptism, not having dirt removed but in seeking a right conscience through Christ. That we have the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism that can guide us in our own reflection. That we remember Noah when we think about baptism, remembering not punishment but love. Because we remember that promise of God that we will never be forgotten. That even in waiting and being tested, we are never far from God's great love.

Because of that, Lent comes with this concept of making a sacrifice as part of our own journey to help us remember. But it isn't just that you give something up to feel bad. It is to help us to draw an even deeper connection to Christ. The hope is that whatever you give up as part of Lent will help you to focus on the journey. When you give something up for Lent, does it make you think about Christ's own temptation in the wilderness? Does your action make you reflect on just how deep God's love is as demonstrated by Christ on the cross? Does it help you to focus in and make it all real for you? Because we can do all sorts of things for Lent, but only some will draw us closer to Christ. I was thinking about Christ's journey to the wilderness when I was thinking about what we can do for Lent this year. And I thought about both giving things up but also taking things up. Because I don't think there's anything wrong with starting

something new for Lent. It might be the better option for some of you that aren't sure what to give up. If giving up an afternoon candy bar will cause you to pause and reflect on Christ, then good! It will help you every day to remember the sacrifices that were made for you. But we can run into a problem if we rob ourselves of some of the simple things that help us to be more loving and kind. If you need your morning coffee to get going and be the best person you can be so that you can share God's love with the world, that might not be the best thing to give up. If it will make you miserable for all forty days of Lent, I don't want you to walk away from Lent feeling that all you learned was that Jesus wants you to have a bad time. Some of us cannot fast during Lent, if at all. We need to be thoughtful about what we are doing for Lent because whatever it is should draw us closer to Christ and help us to know that the kingdom has come near. We should be exploring the depths of God's love. If giving up something traditional isn't working, I would you to think about starting something new. Because starting something new means that you make a sacrifice of your time. And what could be more precious than our time? If you would like to join me, I will be doing a special Lenten devotional Bible reading. This is in addition to any studying or reading that I'm already doing. If you follow the guide that I have printed out and put on the Facebook page, you will read all four Gospels before Easter. You will get four different views of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus just before we celebrate it all on Easter. You'll notice that Sundays are left for reflection, as I mentioned before. I also offer that if you are giving something up that you may let Sunday be your day of rest from that as well.

If you do decide to set aside this time everyday for reading the Gospels, I pray that it becomes an even more regular practice. Maybe taking that time in Lent will help prepare your heart for a new spiritual practice of studying Scripture daily. Maybe it will encourage you to set aside new time for prayers every day. That I hope whatever you do for Lent helps you to grow in love and that you are drawn to an ever-closer relationship with Christ. That it helps you to share the Spirit with others. That maybe you will find other ways this Lent to make a sacrifice of time. Be it calling a friend every day or finding new ways to bring joy to others, I pray that we may learn to use our time more wisely as we remember Christ's own sacrifice for us. Because we should never forget that time is a valuable thing and the way that we use it shows what we value. If we dedicate more time to study Scripture to grow in love and understanding, then it is worth it. If we dedicate more time to prayer for each other, it is worth it. In whatever we do, if it helps us to focus on God's love then it is worth it. So, whether we are giving something up for Lent or starting something new, let them both be reminders of Christ's own preparation for that journey to the cross. Let us all grow closer to Christ in these forty days as we remember all that Christ sacrificed for us in love. And may we come away from them more ready to proclaim the good news for all, that the kingdom and God's love has come near. And may we do so with the blessing of the Father, the teaching of the Son, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. 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. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. 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 listed below. 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.

## **Our Current Series – Depths of Love**

Our Lenten series explores the depths of love as we journey to the cross. Each week we take we reflect on the love that Christ has shown to each of us. And each week we take another step closer to standing at the foot of the cross.

February 18th – Has Come Near    February 25th – For the Sake of the Gospel  
 March 3rd – I Will Raise It Up      March 10th – Loving the Light  
 March 17th – Whoever Serves      March 24th – Blessed is the One  
 March 29th – Hail, King of the Jews

### **Prayer List**

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Eric Veach
Ed & Verna Titus	Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney
Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart
Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Marsha Overton
Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox	Taylor Waldorf
Harriet Tucker	Marlene Kincaid	Cara Dillier	Peggy Farley
Mandy Schumacher	Ann McMorris	Marci Cutts Smith	Jaydelyn Brassard
Pat Hayden Titus	Devona Dittamore	Nancy McElravy	Jeff & Laurie Davidson
Family of Brad Anderson	Marie R.	Connie Brown	Thelma Ball
Stephanie Strewsbury	Family of Ed Davis	Amanda Stults Charter	Gary & Mary Winterrowd
Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle
Greg Williams	Jim & Kay Wells		

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