

Loving the Light

Depths of Love: Part 4 “Loving the Light”

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – March 3, 2024

3rd Sunday in Lent

Readings: Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Reflection: Psalm 107

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 107

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things. He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants. He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry live, and they establish a town to live in; they sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield. By his blessing they multiply greatly, and he does not let their cattle decrease. When they are diminished and brought low through oppression, trouble, and sorrow, he pours contempt on princes and makes them wander in trackless wastes, but he raises up the needy out of distress and makes their families like flocks. The upright see it and are glad, and all wickedness stops its mouth. Let those who are wise pay attention to these things and consider the steadfast love of the Lord.

(Psalm 107:1-9,33-43 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 107, and we hear of God's steadfast love. That the Lord is there for his people to lift them up out of their troubles. That we can count on God in times of distress and discomfort. That we can always turn to the Lord for help. How do you reach out to God when you are in need? Do you offer the peace of Christ to those around you who are troubled? Who will you lift up in prayer? 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 Numbers chapter 21, verse 4 through 9.

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. (Numbers 21:4-9 NRSV)*

Our next reading is from Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1 through 10.

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, 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, doing the will 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 so that we may walk in them. (Ephesians 2:1-10 NRSV)*

Our final reading is from John chapter 3, verses 14 through 21.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “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. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” (John 3:14-21 NRSV)*

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

For this next Sunday in Lent, we have a very familiar reading. The most familiar part is the foundation for the rest of our reading from John. Our other readings are there to enhance our understanding. We can see the center of this as John 3:16, with background and acting as our foundation. “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.” That this is the way that God loves the world. God loves the world in a way that shows a gift of life and not a punishment. The background for this statement of love references Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness as a parallel to Christ’s own actions. For this, we look to Numbers where we get the accounting of Moses in the wilderness. We see that the Israelites are lodging a series of complaints. They complain that there’s no food, there’s no water, and the food they do have is terrible. They want to know why they are even out in the wilderness. They begin to doubt Moses. They have begun to doubt God. With their doubt comes poisonous serpents as a judgment against the people. They declare that they have sinned, they have rebelled against the Lord, and they asked Moses to pray and take the serpents away. This is where we get the comparison that Jesus makes. To take away the serpents, Moses molds a serpent of bronze and puts it upon his staff. When he holds it up, whoever sees will be saved. This is the action that Jesus recalls to explain his own purpose. That just as Moses help up that bronze serpent in the wilderness, the Son of Man will be lifted up in the same way. Just as the action of Moses was not an act of punishment, but an act of salvation, the actions of Jesus will not condemn, but will deliver people from sin and death, and deliver them into life. It is an act of redemption. This leads us into this message about the light. That this is the light of the world. It is a cause for celebration that we are offered. That we may see and believe. We hear this echoed in Ephesians. Like the

Israelites we are dead to our sins, and it is Christ that gives us life. But without salvation, we're all guilty because we all fall short of the glory of God. But in the gift that we have in Christ, we find redemption and salvation. That we find hope in the light through loving the light.

And it's here that we get the longer explanation that I wanted to focus on as part of our Lenten journey. Everything we have sets us up for this idea that we're supposed to understand that Jesus didn't come to condemn the world. He did not show up in order to punish. He came to save. And he came to save sinners. Now, we can sometimes take that idea of being a sinner to a point that we punish ourselves. That we condemn ourselves when we are offered salvation. I think a better understanding is that we are flawed as part of being human. We struggle. We don't always get to where we should be. The judgment that we get is not against us as flawed people. The judgement that we get is against that reason we turn from the light. The problem is that not everybody wants to do the right thing. Not everybody wants love and care we find in Christ. And we get this parallel with the light because when things are done in the dark, nobody can see them. No one can know the wrongs that have been done and no one can know who's doing them when they happen in the dark. Those who want to hurt others do so in the dark because they're not caught. They're not found out and they think they have escaped judgment. If you tell a lie in the dark, no one knows who said it. But the moment there's light the truth is known. And not everyone likes the truth. Reading this as part of Lent reminds me that part of the journey of giving up of self is loving the light. It's giving up of the need to hide in the darkness. Because that's the easier thing to do. It is the selfish thing to do. No one knows that you're the one that said that hurtful thing if it was set in the dark. Nobody knows that you're the one that scoffed at feeding someone who was hungry if it was done in the dark. We embrace the light because it gives us hope because we can confront our flaws. And instead of hiding them, we heal them. Instead of trying to keep them hidden, we bring them out because we can be honest about who we are. And I think that's part of the message that we get in this reading from John's Gospel. It's not that we are condemned for being flawed. No, Jesus came to save sinners. And who are the people who sin? The people who are flawed. But he asks us to recognize our flaws and to work on making them better. And who's help do we have? God's help. The example that we have is the example set for us by Jesus. Because the example that we have is the ultimate giving up of self. Because he gives up of all self to hand himself over that we would understand God's love. That he would pay the ultimate price so that we would understand how much God loves his children. It's an act of shining a bright light into a great darkness.

That can be frightening. It can be frightening when we have nowhere to hide. It can be frightening to think that no secret can remain hidden. But it can also be liberating. Because it means that we give up of self and we accept light and life. That we give up our selfish desires to embrace love. But we have to understand that part of that is letting go of those things we'd want to keep hidden. Because the other thing about bringing them to the light is that we can no longer make excuses. Because we're good at that. We are so terribly good at it that we will

make an excuse for anything. Because if we can hide the true motive, no one ever has to know. And we play a dangerous game. Because eventually we fool ourselves because we get so far into the darkness, we can't even see what we're doing and who we're hurting. And when we get too deep in the darkness, we can't tell that we are hurting ourselves. And so, we look to Christ to be our light in that darkness. And that like Moses holding up that bronze serpent for all to see, Christ is held up as a light for all of us to see by. That we step out of the darkness into the light because it's the first step to letting God make us whole. It's the first step to accepting life and all the responsibilities that come with it. I think that even though it's frightening it's also liberating. Because when nothing is hidden you can then be accepted for who you are and learn to live with your flaws. Because by seeing them you can see how others may help you to overcome them. Because in the darkness, it's easy to deny there's a problem. In the darkness it's easy to think everything is fine. But in the light, we see where we fail. But we also see how others can help us succeed. Because that light also shines on the strengths that we find in each other as we journey in Christ together. And when we see those strengths, we find ways that we may strengthen each other and build each other up and lift each other up.

Because as we build each other up, we lift up Christ among us for all to see. That like that serpent in the wilderness Christ is raised up for all to see to know that there is always hope. Because even in the darkest of times a light will shine, and a light will help us to see clearly to know who we can be. Not that we only see our flaws, but that we see all that we can be with God's help. Not just seeing where we have failed but seeing how we may be strengthened to succeed. Not just in the ways that we have fallen short, but in the ways that God will strengthen us to go the distance. Not just in the ways that we have stumbled and fallen but in the ways that Christ will strengthen us to take up our cross and follow. To let go of the shame that makes us want to hide in the darkness, but instead that we may embrace the love that is in the light. The light that lets us take a step forward as God's people. That lets us take a step forward united in love, strengthened by grace, with a firm foundation of faith. And that in the light we may lift each other up in God's name. That we may love the light because the gift of light is love. And so, in this Lenten journey, we remember the sacrifice that was made so that we would understand God's great love for us. Not an act of saying that we are flawed and hopeless but an act of saying that God believes in us. Because God loves us. And Christ is that shining example of love, overcoming any darkness. So let us not try to hide in the shadows but let us step forth into the light, embracing the life that we find in Jesus Christ. Embracing the love that we may share with one another. And that as we continue in this journey to the cross that we do so gladly, knowing God is with us every step of the way. So that we may take that step forward, loving the light. 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
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Harriet Tucker	Marlene Kincaid	Cara Dillier	Peggy Farley
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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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