

LISTEN

GOD IS CALLING



A Lenten resource for congregations

God is doing a new thing do you not perceive it?



By the Rev. Erika R Uthe
Director for Evangelical Mission, Assistant to the Bishop
Southeastern Iowa Synod, ELCA

Theme Verse

Behold, I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
-Isaiah 43.19

Overview

If Epiphany is a season of answering the question, "Who is God in and through the person of Jesus Christ?" Lent, I think becomes the season of, "How then shall we live?" It is a season of contradictions, a call back to the spiritual practices that ground the life of disciples throughout the millennia, and a call forward to the lives God is calling us to embrace, individually and communally. It is a season that calls us to live in the tension of confession and forgiveness, death and resurrection. In this particular Lenten series, "Listen, God is Calling," we explore how Lent is a season of ancient practice and courageous experimentation, of prophetic dreaming rooted in practiced tradition.

It is no secret that the church is facing some major challenges, and everywhere in the church we can hear the cry, "God, help us!" Pastors and deacons, congregation presidents and treasurers, bishops, and missionaries are all witness to these changes, and it has been said lately that 'the church is dying.' While I have heard some become hesitant of this language, preferring to point out that the church isn't *dying*, it's only *changing*, my hope is that we can come to embrace the idea that the church is dying – for it means that resurrection is coming. You see, if we think of what is happening as simple change, churches move into solutions which often come in the form of remembering the former things and attempting to recreate them. Was the church alive and fruitful when there were lots of kids running around and filling the education wing? We must create programs for kids (even if there are fewer children in our neighborhood)! Was there great success with that community meal? We must get to the kitchen (even if we aren't reaching hungry people)! The fact is that what used to work really isn't working anymore, **and that's ok!** 'Truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' (John 12.24) In his book, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, Fredrik Backman writes, "The mightiest power of death is not that it can make people die, but that it can make the people you left behind want to stop living." The church and even society at large are held captive by nostalgia that chokes

our creative imagination of building and evolving into something new. The power of death to make us want to stop living has taken hold.

As resurrection people the very nature of our faith and life revolves around the cyclical nature of baptism: death and resurrection. For the new to fully emerge, there needs to be full death. It is an important part of our theology: Jesus didn't just 'sort of' die, or metaphorically die. He experienced real, full, and final death before God's ultimate saving grace: resurrection from hell. New life. Easter! (A**elua!)

Gathering for these 40 days under the theme, "Listen, God is Calling" we will explore the ways in which observing Lent through ancient practices can begin to lead us to embrace our baptism, and death, so that God through the Holy Spirit can raise us to new life. The beautiful thing about the resurrection (aside from that it brings new life) is that it is ever-changing. God's creative means of salvation matches every circumstance and is continually being made new. As God says in Isaiah 43, "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Salvation does not look like successful replication of programs from 30 or 40 years ago. It does not look like it did in the years before or after COVID, because it is Lent, 2024! God's salvation is springing forth. As we wait with anticipation to see the new shoots pressing through the frozen ground each spring, we wait to hear God's voice, pointing us to the new shoots of salvation for today.

Each week your congregation will be invited to consider the various ways that God might be calling us as disciples, congregations, and even the wider church to listen as we continually hear God's promise that death is not the end. It is the way to new life. Included in these Lent materials are seasonal worship texts like confession and forgiveness, prayers of the day, offering, post-meal, and blessing; weekly essays on a text from the revised common lectionary, and hymn suggestions. Daily devotions will also be available either for weekly download (available by February 7, 2024) or daily email delivery, beginning February 14. The pattern of the season is as follows:

Ash Wednesday – Listen, God is calling you to life

Lent 1 – Listen, God is calling you to faith


Lent 2 – Listen, God is calling you to free your mind

Lent 3 – Listen, God is calling you to leave your building

Lent 4 – Listen, God is calling you to love

Lent 5 – Listen, God is calling you to bear fruit

It is our prayer that this Lent we can put aside the noise that distracts us from hearing God's call to return to the Lord and find that in dying we rise again.



Ash Wednesday

Listen, God is calling you to life



Verses

We entreat you 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.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

"At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

— 2 Corinthians 6.8b-10

Overview

Ash Wednesday is a liturgical feast day of the senses. We *feel* the weight of ash – so light it floats in the air, and so heavy at times it can seem a burden too great to bear. We *see* the mark of ash, the cross, and our mortality mirrored on the foreheads of those with whom we share our faith journey. We *smell* the ash, ground up and placed on our foreheads, sometimes acrid with smoke, sometimes scented with oil and herb. We *hear* the words, 'remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return,' and 'this is my body, given for you.' We *taste* the bread and wine, brought forth to nourish us from the very earth to which we will return. It is almost as if this day were created so that there can be no chance of missing the message of the gospel, no chance it could get lost in the cacophony of everything else vying for our attention. Fully immersed with all five of our God-given senses, the voice of God rings out loud and clear: you, earth creature, are loved in this life and beyond.

This is important because the cacophony is endless and its promises, while attractive, do not lead to the life that really is life. These promises, which are spoken and perpetuated by forces that go against God and God's love, will tell you that if you are facing affliction, hardship, calamity, sleepless nights, hunger, or anything *other* than pleasant, you must be doing something wrong and it is up to you to fix it. These promises tell you that there is a recipe you must follow to do, look, and be enough. These promises lead you ever further away from the God who in Christ Jesus has reconciled the whole world, and in the end, cannot give the life they promised anyway. Yet these promises have allure, and we often find ourselves seeking after the life we hope they give, often at the expense of our own relationships, the world around us, and which forsake our baptismal identity.

It is no wonder it takes all five senses to be jolted into remembering: remember you are dust, and to dust you will return. No amount of chasing after false promises will change this, and rather than facing the brokenness and

mortality of the world in which we live, we cling to the cross and the life it gives. This is the beauty of the cross – it is simultaneously the sign of life and death, brokenness and wholeness, despair and hope all wrapped up in the person of Jesus Christ, the savior of the world.

It is the cross which reminds us that we can be 'treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.' (2 Corinthians 6.8b-10) Bearing this very cross on our own heads, a sign of the anointing of the Holy Spirit in the waters of baptism, and as a reminder every day of our life, we remember that to enter into the life God intends does not come with stipulations or caveats. This life, given through the gift of God's grace and reconciliation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is yours.

The real work, I think, is not entering into the life God offers, but rejecting the life the world offers. It is remembering that with God, death means life. Because that, my friends, is really hard work. I think it is the reason we hear Jesus' words from Matthew 6 every year at the start of Lent. The spiritual practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving serve as a grounding in these promises, not as an act of obligation, but as an act of repentance: of acknowledging that God's promises are not always the impetus of our actions and our lives are not fully lived in love of God and love of neighbor, of acknowledging that we would rather flee from death and difficult things, preferring an easier way. These practices ground us (no pun intended) in the reality that life is fleeting, and that we will all become earth again, but that death is nothing to fear and in Christ has become the way to life. These practices help us welcome this death and resurrection in big and small ways, reminding us that there is always hope, always life, and always love. This isn't just about our final, earthy death when we celebrate the completion of our baptismal promises, but it is about each and every day and the decisions we make individually and communally. It is about letting go, about not being in control, about giving up – in order to gain. Living centered in these Lenten practices, we are more able to hear God's voice: You are my beloved. You are enough. I am with you. Together we will bring my love to the world. It's ok to let go.

Tomorrow the mark of ash as a visible sign will be gone, yet the promise as it has always been there, remains. These 40 days you are invited to join with us in listening for God's voice and to forsake everything but the life to which God has called you. See? Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation.

Prayer of the Day

God of life and love, in the waters of baptism you claim your children as beloved and call us to die with Christ, that we might live. Give us courage to forsake the empty promises of the world, that grounded in your grace we might enter into the life that really is life, through Jesus Christ the savior whose cross we bear. Amen.

Hymn Suggestions

Christ is the Life – ACS 927

Now is the Time of Grace – ACS 918

O Lord, Throughout these Forty Days – ELW 319



Week One:

Listen, God is calling you to faith

Verses

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 1.14b-15

Overview

Ash Wednesday started our Lenten journey with a call to repentance – to be reconciled to God. Jesus builds the call in today's gospel: repent and believe in the good news. I think to unpack that command we need to take it in parts: first, believe; second, in the good news.

Over the next several weeks we get to explore various salvation covenants and promises that God made with God's people. In the Genesis reading today, I am drawn to Noah's faith – not in the 9th chapter, but back in chapter 6 when God told him to build the ark. Noah didn't even know what he needed to be saved *from* and yet he trusted God and got to work. It was a clear act of faith in a mode of salvation that *had not yet happened*. I am struck by Noah's faith particularly this year because it has become so obvious for the church that while we *know* things need to change, we don't know *how* to change, or *what* we need to do to get there.

Yet Noah's faith and God's covenant reveal to us an important part of God's saving actions in our world: God's salvation is always contextual. Noah and his family didn't need a sturdy home to protect them from the wild animals, because they weren't going to be eaten. Noah didn't need bread and oil, for he had plenty of food. God's salvation came as exactly what Noah needed in that moment. Our theme verse for Lent, 'Behold, I am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it?' seems to beg the question, 'but *HOW* can we perceive something that hasn't ever happened?!' Herein lies the difficulty of living out the first part of Jesus' command: believe. It is also where, I think, it becomes helpful to think about the 2nd half of Jesus' command: in the good news.

While salvation is contextual, it always leads to life, and such is the nature of the good news. The good news is that God has saved the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Salvation can look many different ways: a warm hug after a rough day, bread in hungry hands, shelter in devastation, peace amid turmoil, and the promise of resurrection life at a loved one's funeral. We in the church are certainly looking for salvation. There is a leader shortage, there are extracurricular activities that compete for time and energy, there are building repairs and dwindling funds, etc., etc. And so we pray! God, how can we get people to prioritize Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights? How can we find a pastor who will lead us? How will we be able to maintain this building so it is here for funerals and weddings and Christmases?

The thing is that these prayers for salvation are looking back and expecting more of the same, but the world is headed toward a raging flood, and it takes a metaphorical ark, not young families, charismatic pastors, and beautiful buildings to ride it out. God is already doing something new, can we not perceive it?! The thing is, if we are hanging on to the things of old, we will miss out on the ways God is saving us right here and now. Rachel Held

Evans, in *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, said, "Death is something empires worry about, not something gardeners worry about. It's certainly not something resurrection people worry about."

We are resurrection people and Jesus has called us to repent and believe in the good news! This command from Jesus came straight on the heels of his 40 days in the wilderness, which came straight on the heels of his own baptism and affirmation from God. There is something about being in the wilderness that makes it easier to hear God's voice, I think. As Ash Wednesday utilized all the senses to help us remember, wilderness likewise has a way of putting our senses on high alert. In the wilderness, there is a readiness for the unexpected, a willingness to be surprised. On the other hand, in the wilderness, there is an uneasy questioning – what is around the next corner? As the church faces its current wilderness – a particularly uneasy questioning of what comes next for us – we remember to be alert, to listen for the echoes of God's proclamation: you are my beloved child, and to be alert for the dangers of Satan's temptations.

It takes a mighty act of faith to trust that if we let go of our ideas about what needs to happen to 'bring the church back' God will do something new. It takes a mighty act of faith to keep going, to let the old die away, and know that whatever comes next will be God's way of bringing the world to salvation. It takes faith to look around for the arks today, and to believe that God just might be working in something that seems crazy, or unorthodox. It is as if our church is perfectly poised to adopt the Ventures Prayer:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 317)

Not only is God's hand leading us, and love supporting us, we also have the echoes of God's voice in the wilderness: you are my beloved child. God's voice declaring us beloved, calling us to repentance, and belief in the good news sustains us in the wilderness until the fullness of death and resurrection becomes our reality. Maybe, just maybe, there is a blossoming oasis around this wilderness corner, do we have eyes to perceive it?

Prayer of the Day

O God, you claimed Christ as your beloved Son and went with him in the wilderness of temptation. So give us courage to hear your claim on our own lives, that in faith we may follow in the steps of our ancestors like Noah, who trusting in your promise built an ark before the rain came and waited for your promised salvation. Bring us all to that promised salvation of new life in Christ Jesus, and sustain us in the wilderness with your Holy Spirit. Amen

Hymn Suggestions

When We Are Tested – ACS 922

Jesus, Still Lead On – ELW 624

As Your Spirit in the Desert – ACS 923



Week Two:

Listen, God is calling you to free your mind

Verses

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:23-31
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38 or Mark 9:2-9

Overview

*These words I wrote
Free your mind and the rest gonna go
Can't let empire crush my soul
This is the life I chose and so
I cry freedom*

~ Genesis Be, Freedom Cry

A childless couple 'as good as dead' (Romans 4.19) will become the ancestors of nations and kings? The Savior of the Nations must undergo suffering, death, and 3 days later rise from the dead? The theme in the texts for the 2nd Sunday in Lent is certainly one of mind-bending reality checks. You really do have to love how Paul describes Abraham and Sarah – as good as dead – ready to become the mother and father of nations. And yet here we have a second covenant from Genesis wherein God has found a creative way to bring salvation and life to the humans and world God so loves. Of course we know that the covenant didn't work out so neat and tidy because Abraham's faith was certainly not always 100% steadfast. After all, some time had already passed and God's promise was not coming to fruition. By this time in Abraham's story, he and Sarah had already taken matters into their hands by helping God along a little – Hagar, Sarah's slave had already given birth to Ishmael who was said to be 13 (Genesis 17.25).

If Abraham and Sarah's response to God's promise might be described as incredulous, Peter's response to Christ's teaching in Mark 8 is one of straight rejection. His mind simply could not register that the Savior, the Christ, God's anointed would do anything but rule in power and might, overthrowing an oppressive system of tyranny, and bringing economic and literal freedom to God's people. Peter's idea of salvation did not include the Syrophoenicians, or the Samaritans, and *especially* not the Romans. Just when Jesus thought he had left Satan behind in the wilderness, here again Jesus is facing temptation from one of his closest followers. "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Peter's mind was trapped in what his own reality knew, much like Abraham and Sarah knew that 99-year olds are too old to have children.

Yet God's salvation asks of us to free our minds, to see beyond what has been, to imagine further than our experience knows, to listen to God's call to take up our cross and follow Christ. First, a side note. We know that the

call to take up our cross is a passage that has been (and continues to be) misinterpreted, often to the harm of those who believe that God is calling them to continue in abusive relationships, or to be manipulated. We are clear that in this call to discipleship, God intends full life – not without loss, or grief, or the faith and trust in death and resurrection – but a call that leads to wholeness and reconciliation. Given the clarity that Christ’s call to take up your cross is grounded love and life, we can begin to dig into what it means to take up your cross.

For Peter, there was a singular way for Christ to embody his role as Savior, and his surety that this one way was correct led to him being a vessel of Satan rather than a disciple of Christ. He had the *best* of intentions, and his love for Christ is clear. Peter is so relatable and perhaps you or your congregation can identify with him. He has a vision for how it must be – Jesus has been performing miracles, healing people, he is gathering support and he will finally ride triumphantly into Jerusalem to reclaim David’s throne. Yet in his rigid understanding of God’s salvation, he has missed God’s call to come and die – that you might find new life.

For congregations and church today there seems to be a singular vision for how it must be: pews full of young families, or maybe if we just had a praise band that all the other churches have, or if we just found the perfect night for the community meal. Yet in all of these visions, there is a key component missing – Jesus. The communal vision is one of lots of people, fancy music, and love of neighbor but the reason we do any of this, to worship the risen Lord Jesus and live as disciples, is completely left out of the equation. It seems as though we have all fallen into the trap of setting our minds on human things, and working to gain the world.

But we are in good company. Abraham, Sarah, Peter – all these ancestors in faith each got it wrong, too. And despite their missteps, God remained faithful and fulfilled God’s promises. Jesus calls us to set our minds on divine things, not on human things. Listen, he is calling us! Maybe we don’t need to measure success with the number of children in the education wing. Maybe we don’t need to compare our worship with that of our neighbor down the street. Maybe we can stop beating ourselves up for something we think we’re not, and start celebrating our communities for who we are. God is calling you to free your mind – to let go of your own ideas of salvation and success and take up your cross. As together we take up our cross, maybe we will be able to experience a freed mind and vision for God’s salvation now. We might be freed to see God at work in new and unexpected ways, in new and unexpected people. It is hard to cling to the cross and experience a freed mind, but as the cross calls us and reminds us, it is in death that we find freedom and life. Clinging to Christ’s cross, clinging to his resurrection, we free our mind and we might be surprised to learn that the rest will follow.

Prayer of the Day

O God, in the cross of Christ you have created freedom for all creation. By our baptism you have joined us to Christ’s cross and called us to set our minds on him. In so doing, free our minds that we can hear your call to the church today, and give us the will to follow you to life and salvation, in unity with the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Hymn Suggestions

In the Cross of Christ I Glory – ELW 324

Let us Ever Walk with Jesus – ELW 802

In a Deep, Unbounded Darkness – ACS 1093

Week Three:

Listen, God is calling you to leave your building



Verses

Exodus 20:1-7

Overview

One of the best parts of Lent in year B is that there are so many beautiful stories of God's love for humanity, and no better example for how many, various ways God works to bring creation to salvation. Through the flood, and Abraham and Sarah, and now through the covenant of the 10 Commandments and Moses what is being spun is a tale of salvific creativity in which God meets humanity where they are and finds new ways to bring them to full and eternal life.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."

The 10 Commandments are placed before the Israelites as the next chapter: living in freedom, they will love God and love neighbor, and their freedom will be a means of thriving and abundance for the entire community. Of course, we know that after God delivered the Israelites from slavery they then need to be rescued from their own proclivity to sin and the following 40 years in the wilderness. And then the kings don't end up working out like they thought. And then the Babylonians conquer them. And then, and then, and then... Each time God has found a new and unique way to bring salvation.

Is it any wonder the Israelites are so committed to building the lavish temple and offering the prescribed sacrifices? Clearly this God is one worthy of worship after so many generations of saving a people who just can't seem to get their end of the covenant right. So when Jesus enters the temple at the festival of the Passover, one of the most important festivals as the Israelites remember God's salvation from slavery in Egypt, he is greeted by the moneychangers and merchants, ready to monetize God's salvation and commercialize faith.

Is there any reason Jesus responds with anger, whips, and throwing tables? What was meant to be a life-giving, God-given gift has turned into yet another way in which humans found a way to idolize something other than God. And here is where I start to feel a little uncomfortable as a Jesus-follower in 2024. While we don't have merchants and moneychangers sitting at the door of our narthexes and fellowship halls, I have noticed how our congregational language has shifted in the last several years to be one much more about 'attracting new members.' (Sounds rather commercial, doesn't it?) Whether it is through a building facelift, adding a shiny electronic sign, a new marketing strategy, or a program with a targeted audience, our efforts to get people into the doors of our buildings are taking up more and more space: in our resources, in our budgets, in our ministry.

And, here is where it really hurts: we have now joined the generations of ancestors who can't quite get the covenant right. What was intended as a life-giving gift, a command to honor the sabbath and keep it holy, has become a goal, a growth metric, or a reason to feel guilty or like a failure. But don't worry! Time and time again God found new ways to save God's beloved children, and God is calling to us today, too. 'Jesus answered them,

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." In one sentence (and one world-changing action) Jesus has completely recentered God's salvation – and it has left the building.

Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, literally became God dwelling among us. God no longer needed the temple or the priests to be the conduits of God's word. When Jesus died the curtain of the temple was torn in two, and in the resurrection the Word of God was raised in order to be in and with all of God's children in every time and every place – including in you and in the work of your congregation.

Listen, God is calling to you – you are now the temple through which God works to bring salvation to the world today! God's saving action does not just happen on Sunday mornings in your sanctuary because God is not limited to any one kind of space. It is a difficult thing for us to try to shift in our minds as the paradigm of Christianity shifts in our world today yet when so much of our energy is spent trying to get people in the building, we discount the ways in which God is working *every other day of the week* in the lives of the members of the community.

When the disciples saw Jesus' response to the moneychangers, they remembered what it says in Psalm 69.9 where the psalmist says, 'zeal for your house will consume me.' Zeal for houses of worship is strong in our culture today, and if you want to test the zeal, go into any sanctuary, and move the furniture. A person quickly finds out what is sacred to any congregation when you start messing with sanctuary or worship patterns. While sanctuaries, traditions, and practices are important and can be means by which we experience God's presence, when they become so rigid we are blinded to how God's love is at work in other ways, they have become idols.

Holy and beautiful things happen in sanctuaries, and they hold the range of human experience: joy and excitement of birth and baptism, pride at confirmation and owning of faith, anger, and fury at hardship and disappointment in life, love and commitment at marriage, grief, and loss at funerals, plus everything that happens every other day in our lives. They are places of comfort, they hold core memories of candle lighting and singing of Silent Night on Christmas Eve, shouting 'Alleluia' on Easter morning, chaos of Vacation Bible School, etc. It can be hard to imagine that God is starting to use *new* things in the world to bring about these *old* things.

We find that there can be a fine line between faithfulness and idolatry, or as Fredrik Backman said, "It's strange how close love and fear live to each other." When we deeply love something, it becomes easy to hold on too tight, fearing that any change will result in the loss of what we have come to find life-giving or comforting. As this Lenten season is reminding us, God's work of salvation is ever-changing and relevant to our needs here and now. What if, in our attempts to hold on we have missed God's call to the new ways God is saving our world today? Only by clinging to the cross can we have the courage to believe that God is really calling us to ministry in new ways (and places) that aren't centered in our buildings. Trusting in new life, living by faith, and with open minds, we find the courage to let the Spirit drive us out into the world and find how God is at work.

Prayer of the Day

Holy God, you have promised to always be our God and you constantly meet us in our need and offer salvation. Open our eyes to see this salvation around us, and the faith to believe that, as your beloved children, we are a means by which your love lives in the world today, through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Hymn Suggestions

Son of God, Eternal Savior – ELW 655

Christ is the Life – ACS 927

In the Cross of Christ I Glory – ELW 324

Week Four:

Listen, God is calling you to love



Verses

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient 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

Overview

On this fourth Sunday of Lent once again we find the Israelites in need of saving, ironically in the midst of their current salvation operation. You see, it doesn't seem like we always have the same idea about salvation that God does. These Israelites had been crying out for salvation from the Egyptians and God delivered them safely through the Red Sea. In the midst of the dry desert, God provided them manna and quail, water from rocks, light at night, and shade by day. Yet this desert life was not quite what the Israelites had in mind – while they were free, they were missing all of the amenities of their past life. Even though they had steady and promised access to food, they 'detested it' and complained.

I wonder how often we let our inner Israelite take over our own prayer for salvation today. I admit that it's happened to me a time or two: I pray for something and God's solution doesn't match what I *actually* wanted, and so I complain. I didn't mean *that*, God! If you've ever dealt with this yourself, I bet you can understand God's frustration that God delivered on what was requested and the people were upset anyway. In a very human-like response, God retaliates with poisonous snakes set loose among the people. (There are some extremely problematic parts of this whole narrative, which we will pass over for these purposes, but would be some good fodder for conversation another time.)

In a clear foreshadowing to Christ's own crucifixion, God instructs Moses to construct a bronze serpent and raise it up on a pole for the people to look at and be saved. Jesus himself notes this connection in his conversation with Nicodemus as he once again foretold his own death and resurrection. Nicodemus has come to have this conversation with Jesus because, well, Jesus isn't quite what the teachers of Israel were expecting. Israel was waiting for their next King – the one who would come and rule with justice and righteousness, setting up God's kingdom in this time and place. Yet Jesus tells Nicodemus that the world doesn't need a king of righteousness – the world needs light and love. Deliverance wasn't from oppressive tyrants, but rather from the darkness of evil. "This is the judgement: that the light has come into the world and the people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

There are an unfortunately large number of instances in the history of the church where it turns out that our own idea of 'salvation' ends up being something other than God's love for creation and leaves a trail of harm, disillusionment, and oppression in its wake. Even worse, this damage is done in the name of Jesus, placing stipulations and requirements on the gospel. You must believe like us, act like us, love like us, worship like us, submit to everything we deem is true. We don't need to get into the plethora of examples, but even after Martin Luther set in motion the reformation in 1517 with his (at the time) earth-shattering teaching that God's grace was free for everyone based on grace alone, the church has continued to get it wrong.

It is so much easier for us to try to tell God how it is supposed to go rather than believing that simply by looking to Christ, lifted high on the cross, the whole world can find salvation. As we find in Ephesians, "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 God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2.8-10) Listen, God is calling us (church) to keep our eyes on Jesus, and in so doing embody the love for which God created us. This love is a no-strings-attached love, one which is unafraid of the light shining on our deeds. It is a church full of life and faith, with minds open to God's salvation, a church who isn't afraid of going into the world to meet their neighbor, and one whose eyes are fixed on the Tree of Life, Jesus Christ.

So often it feels like the church is in Nicodemus' shoes, just trying to catch up to what God is doing, and we find out that we've been out in the dark, expecting something different. 'How can these things be? the church asks, echoing Jesus' own questions about Jesus' teachings. While clinging to the cross of Christ has been of utmost importance since his own life on earth, it feels even more imperative in these days as forces that go against God seem to be everywhere. Some of them are even parading around using the name of Jesus as a robe, taking the name of God in vain and committing acts of sin and violence against God's beloved children. It is now that the church must not weary of finding life and light in the shadow of the cross, knowing that it was not glory and power which Jesus came to give, but in humiliation and suffering he entered our brokenness to redeem it.

Only in the cross can we find the courage we need to follow Jesus and proclaim that the immigrants and refugees are welcome, that love is love, that imperfect and broken people are worthy and beloved, that racism, sexism, xenophobia, and all other -isms are works of darkness and stand in judgment in the light of Christ. Listen, God is calling us to do the new, old thing again and again and again – to live in love and life at the foot of the cross.

Prayer of the Day

Loving God, by Christ's death and resurrection on the cross you have brought light and life to all the earth. So keep our eyes fixed on his cross, that knowing it is only your grace which holds us fast, we may live in that love, finding and proclaiming salvation to a broken world, through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Hymn Suggestions

There in God's Garden – ELW 324

O Christ, Our Hope – ELW 604

What Wondrous Love is This – ELW 666



Week Five:

Listen, God is calling you to bear fruit



Verse

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

-Jeremiah 31:31-33

Overview

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant... Once again in this fifth week of Lent, we have a new covenant, a new way of God saving God's people. Only this time there are no outward signs, no miraculous deeds done, and no angel visits. This time the covenant comes as a quietly cleansed heart on which is written God's law. It is an entire people that no longer needs teaching or reminding because their hearts know and follow God. As we've spent time hearing again the stories of God's various covenants with God's people over the last several weeks, it has been a beautiful study of how God's love is forever calling creation onward. 'It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt...' With each new generation, God calls the people to a new covenant, one that meets them in their need and provides God's salvation. As we near Holy Week, we are reminded in the covenant from Jeremiah that God's forgiveness of sin and freedom from iniquity lies at the heart of this life God intended and that Jesus Christ, God's son given for the salvation of the world, is the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets, the final covenant. It is in the person of Jesus Christ that God's covenant of love for all the cosmos is finally fulfilled, not in power or might, but in faithful, gentle, and persistent love, which is so selfless Christ was willing to enter into death itself to bring redemption.

Jesus himself said that, 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' This pattern of death and resurrection, while extremely difficult to live out and trust, is in fact how God's love overcomes sin, death, and the devil. It is the call and of discipleship, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering that every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

This entire season of Lent has focused on the promise of death and resurrection, the daily dying and rising with Christ in baptism, and the new ways God has continually provided life out of death. As disciples we are called to welcome this cycle of death and resurrection, to trust that only by letting go can we experience the life God intends. God is calling the church of this generation – come, and die, not the final death, but the death of a seed waiting in the dark soil for life to spring forth. The theme verse for our season talks about God making rivers in the desert, a way when the path is obscure.

The question for our generation is not, 'how can we bring the past back?' but 'what needs to die in order for God's Spirit to bring new life?' The question could easily accompany questions about our own motivations, our own idols, and our own insistence that we know what is best for God and the world today. Listen church, do you not hear? Can you not perceive? God is calling the church today to look for the rivers in the desert. Food deserts came up in conversation the other day, along with all sorts of other kinds of deserts that have cropped up in the fertile ground of rural Iowa: healthcare deserts, social service deserts, etc.

What kind of river will God bring forth in these deserts? What kind of fruit might be borne from the seeds of the church's death today? Could it be that the ministry of tomorrow looks less like education wings full of children, and more like space used by county services or traveling nurses? Or the rides to worship on Sundays transformed into rides to dialysis on Monday? Of course, these kinds of rivers are already starting to flow, as congregations become re-rooted in their neighborhoods and communities. Congregations partnering with community gardens and feeding programs, or their neighboring elementary schools. These signs of the church bearing fruit are the signs of God's covenant – of love lived out in discipleship. It is as the camp song from a few decades ago went (feel free to sing this in your best rap voice):

*By this my father's glorified:
that you bear much fruit (much fruit).
So you p-p-prove to be
disciples of me*

By clinging to the cross of Christ, the very cross marked on the brows of believers in the waters of baptism, the cross etched on in ash at the start of Lent, the church finds that in the act of dying, it might bear the fruit of God's love.

Prayer of the Day

God of new life, you have called your church to come and die, that it might bear fruit for a hungry world. Trusting in your Holy Spirit, so write your law of love on our hearts that we gladly follow you to the cross, so that we might rise again. In Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

Hymn Suggestions

Seed that in Earth is Dying – ELW 330

O God, Who Gives us Life – ACS 1086