

# Sundays of Lent 2024 Messages

From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)

Russell, Kentucky

*Ash Wednesday – Feb. 14 – “The Fresh Embers  
Among The Dying Ashes”*

First Sunday in Lent – Feb. 18 – *“What 40 Days Can Teach Us”*

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It Is?”*

# *“THE FRESH EMBERS AMONG THE DYING ASHES”*



Message for *Ash Wednesday*

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 14, 2024

JOEL 2: 1-2, 12-17 – 2 CORINTHIANS 5: 20B-6:10

MATTHEW 6: 1-6, 16-21

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND  
FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS  
RISEN!!

**D**oes anybody really sin anymore? I mean, here we are living among all those rapists and serial killers and mass murderers and child molesters, the shadow of the Holocaust still in our minds, the assassinations and terrorist bombings, and everybody's doing whatever he or she wants to, mothers and fathers killing their own children, their own children! Does what I do really matter?

These words came from a young woman who had just been accused of being a sinner herself, who had just confessed to something she was doing. Well, welcome to the club! Except for one man, Jesus, it's a club with 100% participation.

Tonight we enter into a new season in our church calendar, the season of Lent. Granted, even though the church calendar rolls over to a new year with Advent, to me there's something about Lent that feels like a new beginning.

I think a lot of it is the time of year, with spring approaching. The word "Lent" actually comes from the Anglo-Saxon word

“lencten.” It means “lengthen” and is connected to the lengthening of days with spring’s approach. In less than a month, March 10th to be exact, we will set our clocks ahead an hour as we begin Daylight Savings Time so we help lengthen those days of daylight.

Just to refresh our memories: the season of Lent lasts 40 days, not including the Sundays. Sunday is always a little day of resurrection. 40 days has biblical significance. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights when Noah was in the ark. Moses stayed on the top of Mount Sinai for 40 days. And before he launched his ministry, Jesus retreated to the wilderness and fasted for 40 days where he was tempted by Satan. That will be our gospel this Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent.

Lent has always been a season of preparation. It’s sort of a revival period. It’s meant to stir up the embers of our faith, to rekindle the flames of our devotion and our hope in the Lord.

I think there’s a tendency to think that we should be extremely sober and penitent during the season of Lent. But our reading today from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount would suggest otherwise: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Then it gets good and really hits home. Verse 2: ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.’ Jesus is saying this with biting irony; he knew how to use sarcasm. When the Pharisees, oh how we love our Pharisees, but if these guys wanted to give something to the poor, it was their custom to go down to a busy street corner in Jerusalem and literally blow a trumpet. The Salvation Army with their bellringers are not doing it for show like the Pharisees. Ok, so there were no PA systems in existence and they needed to get as many of the poor and needy together

to receive the gifts; it gave the Pharisees the opportunity to let others see their good works. Do you see parallels today in the way some Christians give? Jesus said that when the Pharisees do it that way, they have their reward. What reward? What were they after to begin with? Jesus said they did it to have the glory of men. They blew the trumpet and everybody came running out to see how generously they gave, and that was their reward. Their giving was not between them and God.

Why do you give? There is more than one way to give. I read about a man, not in this congregation or any other local Lutheran congregation, who attended a church but only gave a dollar, just a dollar, if a regular offering was taken. However, if the question was raised, how many would give a hundred dollars or even more for some church need, he wouldn't hesitate to give that amount. He was blowing his trumpet. Again, what you give is between you and God and if you were to enlist the aid of a third party to make sure your gift was acknowledged, you don't get any credit in heaven. Giving just to get your name on the outside of a building for all the world to see demonstrates your blowing your trumpet and a lot of people do that but it is worth nothing to God.

Bottom line, don't reach into your pocket with one hand and then put the other hand in the air to let people know how much you are giving! Jesus said, 'When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms, your offering, may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.'

More strong language by our Lord. 'Do not be like the hypocrites. They have their reward.' They pray so they may be

seen by others. A man might wear a prayer shawl in public which advertises the fact that he is praying. Jesus said that when a man prays like that, he has his reward. He gets what he wants, that is, to be seen by others. But his prayer never gets above the rafters of the building.

Concerning the subject of prayer, we are told that it should be secret and sincere. But don't keep repeating the same thing over and over; God knows what you need so say it once and be done with it. Jesus says that if we ask the Father one time, He hears us. So be sincere and be simple, no fancy words or phrases to impress anyone, especially God. And I'm getting into text not part of our Gospel today. Just to reiterate, prayer is not to be done for display; it is a relationship between you and God, and the most effective prayer is when you enter into your closet or other private place.

From there we skip over the Lord's Prayer, and move into the subject of fasting. Jesus said, 'Do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. They have their reward.' Fasting can be very beneficial for the person doing the fasting but it should be a personal matter again between that person and God. Yeh, I'm fasting for God this Lenten season; I'm giving up chocolate or beer or hamburgers or whatever. Not looking forward to it but I have to do it. Yuk! 'Your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

Then there's the subject of money. Aw, come on, do you have to talk about money again? You started out talking about giving alms. Not too many people like the preacher talking about money. They say, 'It's mine; I can do with it what I want; I can buy whatever I want; I can give to whomever I want and it doesn't have to be the church. It's my money!' Jesus said, 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and

rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth or rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.'

We learn very early on in life that when you walk into a store and you see something that you would like to buy, what is one of the first things that you look at? You look at the price tag. You want to know how much money that thing is going to cost you and if you have enough money then to buy it. It is at that point, that you learn the power that money possesses.

A man walked into the local toy store to get his daughter, who was having a birthday the next day, a Barbie doll, which she dearly wanted and seems to be all the craze these days, even having a movie named after her. He asked the clerk what they had and the price: This is Astronaut Barbie, she sells for \$19.95; this is Doctor Barbie, same price, \$19.95; this is President Barbie, again \$19.95; and this one is Mermaid Barbie, \$19.95. Then there's this one, Divorce Barbie and she sells for \$299.95. The man was amazed; why so much more; she looks the same as the others you've shown me! This is Divorce Barbie and she comes complete with Ken's house, Ken's car, Ken's boat, and Ken's surfboard plus some other odds and ends!!

Money and the amount of money you have can allow or prevent you from HAVING certain things, DOING certain things, and some might even argue, BEING certain things. Money is powerful. Jesus repeatedly addresses the topic of money in his sermons. Why? Because Jesus understood that money is powerful.

We know or at least understand that the cost of eternal life is more than any of us could pay with our best effort and all our money. What does God do? God steps into human history and pays what we could not. Jesus comes and pays the price that is required for you and me to live eternally in heaven. The cost is

shocking. The Bible says, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." The cost for us to move into heaven's eternal home would require God himself pouring out his blood. Jesus would offer his perfect life in the place of every imperfect person. Jesus would be punished for every single one of our sins.

So, here we are again, another Ash Wednesday. Lent begins with the observation of Ash Wednesday. We mark our foreheads with a smudge of ashes. While we're marked, we hear sobering words pronounced: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Ash Wednesday calls us to remember our mortality. We are finite creatures! Our days are numbered. One day, we all will die; those odds haven't changed! So today we receive this paradoxical mark on our brow. It speaks both of death but also of life. In the ashes, we remember we are dust. But in the cross, we look to the resurrection opened to us through that Easter morning when our Lord stepped from his grave into the light of the new day.

This Lenten season, I challenge you to pray more regularly, fast more carefully, and give more generously. In these spiritual disciplines, you will find renewed faith.

**Amen.**

# *“WHAT 40 DAYS CAN TEACH US”*

Message for the First Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 18, 2024

GENESIS 9: 8-17 — 1 PETER 3: 18-22 — MARK 1: 9-15

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

**I** want you to imagine that you are in the wilderness by yourself and you're going to be there for 40 days. What will you do for that period of time? No TV, no radio, no magazines, just wild beasts as we're told and angels waiting on you. Could you make it?

Remember, I told you a few weeks ago that we'd be skipping around in the Gospels, even though Mark is our primary Gospel for our texts in this lectionary year. When you read this gospel, you'll notice that Mark is the shortest of all four gospels. Mark writes his stories very concisely. Mark practices an economy of words and gets right down to business. The effect leaves his gospel like a soup stock that's been reduced. The flavors intensify.

That's certainly true of his account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Matthew and Luke go into detail. They describe the interactions between Jesus and the devil. But Mark? He reduces the whole thing to just two verses!

“And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” We don't get the ‘turn these stones into bread; you've fasted for 40 days; you're hungry; no one would blame you; go ahead, I won't tell anyone; you're Jesus; you have the power.’ We don't get Satan suggesting that Jesus jump off the highest peak but he won't get hurt; he's got angels to catch him and keep him from getting hurt, so go ahead Jesus, jump! And we don't get Satan taking Jesus to the highest point so he can see everything from there, and Satan

again suggesting that if Jesus would just bow down and worship he Satan, he could have all that in his power. Guess what Satan, he created it; it's all His anyway.

Jesus swiftly moves from his baptism by John, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" End of Baptism but we had that same text a few weeks ago. Then we move to his wilderness temptation, which again was only 2 verses that I just read, and from there straight into his mission. 'Repent, and believe in the good news.' The three scenes are strung together like three firecrackers. Boom, boom, boom! Done!

What's puzzling is the Spirit. When Jesus rises from the water after his baptism, Mark says that the heavens are split open. They rupture. And down from this hole in the sky, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove.

And then that same Spirit DRIVES Jesus into the wilderness. Immediately I might add. Jesus is thrust, shoved, pushed out there, by the Holy Spirit of God! The violent laceration that split open the heavens has now propelled Jesus into this desert realm so that he might be tempted. We read that the heavens were torn apart; that sounds pretty violent, doesn't it?

The Spirit desires this period of temptation. Jesus needs to undergo a test.

Before Jesus enters his ministry, he needs to be tested. These tests will give Jesus assurance that he will need before he begins His ministry.

Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness to test his resolve. This testing will strengthen him, just like fire strengthens iron. The trials he undergoes will sharpen his discerning spirit. He'll better understand his purpose.

Jesus' baptism. His temptation. His ministry. If these three actions have one thing in common, it's this: Throughout all of them, Jesus remains absolutely focused on obedience to God.

- He submits to John's baptism, not because he needs to repent. But he aligns himself to God's will.

- His period of temptation sharpens his understanding of what his purpose is and who he serves. These forty days in the wilderness help him to hardwire the movement from his baptism to his ministry.
- And throughout his earthly mission, he remains obedient to God. Even unto the cross, his purpose doesn't waver.

We've entered this 40-day period of Lent. This annual season provides an opportunity for us to reflect on the state of our spiritual health. How is our obedience to the will of God? Lent's wilderness wandering is indicative of our life. Like Jesus, we face choices. How do we connect God into our decision making? What influences are leaning on us?

Like Jesus, our guidance comes from our baptismal identity. On that day we were claimed by God. We were declared a child of God. That identity is like the North Star to us. As we negotiate wilderness landscape, we live among "our modern wild beasts" and other dangers threatening to our welfare. And our old Satanic foe presents us with choices, too.

Unlike Jesus, we err and stumble. Our hope wavers into despair. We make choices based on selfish fears and motivations. But baptism's promise of grace is there for us. It reminds us that no one can snatch us from God's hand.

About 2,500 years ago, a fellow by the name of Aesop told a tale. This fable of Aesop begins with a sad, sorrowful female eagle sitting on the branch of a tree. Next to her sat a kite, a carrion-eating raptor. Noting the eagle's dejection, the kite asked, "Why does the most majestic of birds wear such a mournful look?"

The eagle sadly replied. "I need a mate and I have been unable to find one." After a moment, the kite sympathetically suggested, "Why not marry me?" The eagle turned and asked, "And could you take care of me?" This was in the days before female eagles were liberated. Wounded by the question, the kite boasted: "Why, I have often carried away ostriches in these talons."

With no other offers forthcoming, the eagle agreed to be married to the kite. Soon after the ceremony, she said to her husband, "I wonder if you would bring back an ostrich for supper. I've never eaten an ostrich and I think one would be wonderfully delicious for our evening meal." In a second the kite was gone. In two seconds he was back and placed before her not an ostrich, but a mouse. A pitiful, pathetic and from the smell of things... a long dead mouse. Insulted, the eagle

cried: “And is this how you fulfill your promise?” to which the kite confessed, “I said what was necessary to get you to do as I wished.”

This is a story about us describing the all successful temptation techniques used by Satan since the beginning of time. Our old evil foe has shown his readiness, his eagerness to say anything and everything necessary to get us to do what He wants.

Satan’s greatest triumph may be in causing people not to take him seriously. If people don’t believe you exist, if they believe you are just a cartoon character with red horns, a tail and a pitchfork, they won’t try to stop you. And if a person no longer has a conscience, then selfish greed will be the mode of operation; Satan’s work is done. Most of our failures, when temptations come our way... and they will...can be traced to a foolish self-confidence that overestimates our own abilities and underestimates the power of our spiritual enemies.

Satan does not observe the traditional rules of warfare. He uses anything and everything that he can to bring us down. This is what Paul meant when he spoke about the “schemes of the devil.” The word “schemes” might also be translated as “traps” or “tricks.”

Satan doesn’t fight fair. He’s not going to give you an even break. He is a liar, a deceiver, a diabolical “angel of light” who comes to you in a thousand guises, tempting you to disobey the Lord. And he’s a lot smarter than you are. He knows your weak points better than you do. And he can attack you any time of the day or night. Satan does not fight fair.

In the Garden of Eden He slides up to Adam and Eve and slyly, sneakily suggested that they should just take a look at the forbidden fruit...”What can it hurt,” he asked, implying that God was holding out on them. Like the kite, Satan will say whatever is necessary to get you to do as He wishes.

I need not tell you what happened. They ate, and since that day all of us have been eating the forbidden fruit of temptation. If you read through the Bible, you will come across stories of men and women who are called heroes of faith. Noah built an ark, without the knowledge of rain. Moses parted the Red Sea; Elijah raised a boy from the dead, and David brought down a giant with a slingshot.

These folks, these heroes, also did some pretty stupid, amazingly sinful stuff. Noah did build an ark, but he also got himself seriously tipsy. Abraham was the father of nations, but his lying got him into trouble. His messing around with a servant girl

still has serious consequences. Moses was a legendary leader, but he began as a murderer and he did deliberately disobey God. David was the great warrior-king, but he was also David the murdering adulterer. Elijah did miracles and called fire from heaven, but he also hid out in caves and complained about how he was all alone.

Zacharias, the father of John the Baptizer, was an experienced temple priest, but he couldn't find it in his heart to believe God, even when the Lord sent an angel with a special message. He doubted. Peter was a great apostle, but almost every action of faith he performed was counter balanced by doubt or denial. He walked on water, but sank; he confessed Jesus as the Son of God, and then tried to talk the Savior from going to Jerusalem. One night he fell asleep when he was asked to pray. Then a few hours later he cursed that he did not know Jesus. Like the kite, Satan will say whatever is necessary to get you to do as He wishes and save your own skin.

These stories are in the Bible to remind us that Satan is skillful in tricking believers into following our internal selfish desires. I've said it before, but Satan will say anything to get us to do what He wishes. This is why Jesus came. He came to break the power of Satan, who makes people so afraid of death that they will say foolish things like: "All people will go to heaven... there are just different pathways to follow...so be tolerant". Or... "Life is short. This is all there is, go for the gusto, now do what you want."

In our Gospel lesson today Mark only writes two short verses about the temptation of Jesus but they are both critical to our understanding of how Satan's temptations can be overcome.

The words in verse 4 of Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress," are an apt description of our hope: "For God himself fights by our side, with weapons of the Spirit.

Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away,

they cannot win the day. The kingdom's ours forever!"

The baptismal promise of God's steadfast love is our shelter, our protection, in the wilderness. May the trials placed before us strengthen our faith. Day after day, we

are born anew in the waters of baptism. Our new self arises, tried in adversity, strengthened by faith.

That is the way temptation works. It places things in our path meant to blind our eyes to the kind of life God wants us to live.

I was asked some time ago if I believed that God brings temptations into our lives, and I told that person that 'no, I did not believe God brings temptations into our lives.' But temptations are part of living in a world that is not fully redeemed. So all around us are things that would lead us away from believing in God with our whole heart and loving our neighbor as our selves. There's a bumper sticker that says: "Lead me not into temptation, I can find it myself."

Temptation is a pretty common experience and our batting average for resisting it is not always impressive. We must remember that temptation is not a sin; it's giving in to temptation that makes it a sin.

With God's grace, we can learn to avoid temptation, we can learn to walk away from those things that would be gods in our life. With God's grace, we can keep our focus on Him and the love we have for Him. With God's grace, we can turn to loving our neighbor. We can learn to love someone else instead of loving ourselves.

AMEN!!

# *“THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP”*

Message for the Second Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 25, 2024

GENESIS 17: 1-7, 15-16 — ROMANS 4: 13-25 — MARK 8: 31-38

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

**T**he owner of a boat in Scotland, kind of like a ferry, had the job of taking passengers across a lake in his boat. One day, one of the people on board inquired concerning the oars the boatman was using. One oar had the word FAITH carved on it and the other WORKS.

The old man said, "I'll show you the reason." He put one oar into the water, the one marked FAITH and began to row. The boat would just go in circles. Then he took the oar out and put in the one marked WORKS and began to row. The same thing happened, the boat went in the opposite circle.

Then he picked up both oars, FAITH and WORKS, placed them in the water and began to row. As he pulled these oars together, the boat began to move forward in a straight line. To the passenger who questioned the oars he said, 'That is the way in the Christian life; one is no good without the other.'

The principle that both FAITH and GOOD WORKS are important in the life of a Christian was demonstrated very well by that story. Our lesson this morning deals with the subject of faith and works. It is a very difficult subject to understand. But it is a subject that is important for the life of a Christian believer.

Speaking of the life of a Christian, how do you look at being a Christian? Is it a hobby? Is it something you love to do, but don't have enough time for? Or do you look at it as a job? Something you have to do, but you don't really enjoy? Or is it a conglomeration of the two? That all depends on how you look at it. I hope that

after today's sermon you will look at Christianity and realize that Christianity is more than a hobby; it's a way of life!

Another question: What does it mean to deny yourself and take up your cross? How does it even help you in your daily battle with sin? And what if I told you the cross is not and cannot be loved. How would you react? Those words were written by Jurgen Moltman, a German theologian, in his book "The Crucified God." It is believed to be this generation's most important book on the meaning of Christ crucified. At the outset he dispels any notions of the cross that romanticize or sanitize its reality. Simply put, the cross is the means by which human beings crucified the Son of God. The cross is the instrument by which suffering and death inflicted themselves on the innocent servant of God. The cross is first and foremost not a piece of jewelry or an attractive wall decoration; it is the scandal of how we treated God incarnate.

You and I are either radical, extremist Christians or we are non-Christian. I've titled this message 'The Cost of Discipleship' but it could just as well be titled 'The Cost of Non-Discipleship.' Jesus wants us to compare the costs.

Think about this, folks; have you ever noticed how unapologetic Jesus is when he makes demands like the one in today's text? In chapter 10 of Mark's Gospel, future Gospel reading, Peter is going to tell Jesus, 'We have left everything to follow you,' and that was true. How does Jesus respond? Did he say, 'Oh, I'm so sorry you had to suffer such a loss. Are you okay?'

No, basically, he said, 'You're welcome.' He told them, 'You're going to receive 100 times what you gave up now, and eternal life later. You haven't lost anything.' There are no martyrs in the kingdom of God.

In our text today from Mark 8, Jesus and his disciples were on their way to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. As they were going, he asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets. And that's all well and good, but, but what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ," and Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. Jesus was not one to mince words. In verse 32, 'He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get

behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

It was a scandal that was not a surprise. Immediately after Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of God, the first order of business for Jesus was to make clear the reality of that confession. Jesus was not to be the conquering hero and triumphant warrior expected by many if not most people. In the words of Jesus: The Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed; and after three days rise. Peter's abrupt rebuke of Jesus barely scratched the surface of popular discontent. Years of jubilant rejoicing and expectations unraveled as Jesus' words flowed out; suffering and rejection and death. Such a fate for the Son of God was unheard of. Peter protested. Peter rejected that idea.

"Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would follow me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his life? Or what can a man give in exchange for his life? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." Do we really want that for us? I don't think so!!

We left off last time with Jesus and the disciples as far from Jerusalem as they ever traveled—way up north in Caesarea Philippi. And the disciples standing in what must have been stunned silence. Jesus had just called Peter Satan. What if Jesus called you Satan? What sin did Peter commit that was so bad that it provoked Jesus to call him Satan? It was a sin that most people wouldn't think is that big a deal. Peter was guilty of having in mind the things of men. "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Most people, when they think of the really bad sins—the ones you'd have to be satanic to commit or that would make you deserve eternal torment in hell, they think of things like mass murder or rape or something like that. But here we see all it takes for you to be satanic in Jesus' eyes is for you to do the most natural thing in the world—just have in mind the things of men. Having in mind the things of men seems harmless. It's like natural gas—a colorless, odorless element that is very lethal.

So what about you? Do you have in mind the things of men?

We are right at the climactic center point of the book of Mark where Peter gets an A+ on Mark part 1 (Who is Jesus?). Peter says, “You are the Christ.” But then he gets an F on part 2 of Mark (What did Jesus come to do?). In fact, I think we could call it an F minus because Jesus gives him the correct answer up front and Peter still gets it wrong. How can you still get it dead wrong when the teacher tells you the right answer? It was because he couldn’t accept the right answer because he had in mind the things of men. So what are the things of men? And what does it mean to have them in mind?

I’ll start with the second question. The phrase translated to have in mind is *phroneo*, which is a word that refers to attitude. It’s the same word in Philippians 2:5 where it says: Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. So having in mind the things of men means to have the attitude of men. Attitude involves not only how you think but also how you feel about those thoughts and your whole perspective and way of looking at things. It’s the glasses you put on that color everything you see. That’s what attitude is. And Jesus says if you have the natural, human attitude about life, you might as well be the devil.

Satan is a liar. His goal is to get you to think and feel differently from how God thinks and feels. And that’s easy for him because of our nature.

Isaiah 55:8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

So if you don’t want to be on team Satan, you have to transcend human thinking. Your attitude has to be superhuman—especially your attitude about suffering. That’s where Peter went wrong. Jesus said, “The Son of Man must suffer” and Peter said, “No way, not going to happen on my watch.”

Now you might hear that and say, “I’m okay with the idea that Jesus had to suffer and die. I don’t have a problem with that, so I’m in the clear, right?” Not so fast. Look what Jesus does next.

“If anyone would follow me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

So this superhuman attitude isn't just about Jesus' suffering; it's also about our own suffering. Normally the Bible says the requirement for becoming a Christian is to believe. But instead of just using the word, "believe," he's going to flesh out what faith in him looks like in practical terms. And what it looks like is having a superhuman attitude not only about Jesus' suffering, but about your undergoing the same suffering. That's what following means. Jesus repeats the word "follow" twice.

"If anyone would follow me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

He's saying, "Following means following. If you want to be my follower, then you have to go down the same road I'm going down—the road of rejection, suffering, and death."

And to do that, he says, you'll have to deny yourself.

Jesus addresses those who would be Christian with three conditions: Let them deny themselves; let them take up their cross; and let them follow me. That denial sets aside one's own prerogatives and privileges for the sake of others. Nowhere do the Gospels portray Jesus in a self punishing, self hating manner. Frequently, though, is Jesus portrayed as the Lord who freely and graciously comes to us as servant. Denial is neither self hatred, nor is it a picking and choosing of things to give up that in the long run matter little if anything to our spiritual growth. For us to deny ourselves in the example of Jesus is to set aside preoccupation with what we deserve from others for the sake of what we can offer to them.

Taking up the cross speaks of will we exercise when deciding to risk Christian discipleship. In Jesus' time, the Romans required condemned criminals to carry their own crosses to the place of their execution; Jesus did if you remember until Simon of Cyrene came along. But doing so was considered the final indignity, akin to demanding an inmate on death row today to plug in the electric chair or hook up the IV that would be used for his or her execution. Taking up the cross was not their decision, but their sentence. In contrast, Jesus invites the would-be disciple to take up your cross; not by coercion but by choice. Just as denying oneself must be a freely chosen act, so must the bearing of discipleship's cross be our willing acceptance of the path trod first by Jesus.

One final word folks: Christian is not so much a tradition as it is an invitation: if any want to become my followers, Jesus said, let them, let us, deny themselves,

deny ourselves, and take up the cross and follow. The identity of Christian in this world is not our inherited birthright nor does it come in certain social circles. 'Christian' comes in cross bearing! Lent points the way down this same cross road. Christ bids us come. All that remains is our decision, about the cross. Not only the cross Christ bore, but the cross Christ invites us to take up and follow. Are there any takers? What about you?

AMEN!!

# *“THE ANGRY JESUS IS SCARY BUT NECESSARY”*

Message for the Third Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 3, 2024

EXODUS 20: 1-17 — 1 CORINTHIANS 1: 18-25 — JOHN 2: 13-22

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

(The following will be said in a gruff voice to various people in the congregation.)

“**M**ove over. Put your bulletin down. Stop looking at me like that. Fold your hands and look at me.” If I was serious about the things I just said, you might wonder: “What’s eating Pastor?” The disciples wondered that about Jesus as they watched the normally mild-mannered rabbi flip over tables and with a whip drive merchants and animals out of the temple court. What was eating Jesus is what should consume all Christians.

Confronted with life’s tragedies and triumphs, have you ever wanted to ask God why? If you’re like most people, the answer to that question is a loud ‘Yes!’ God, why do you do things like this? God, why do you allow tragedies to happen? God, why do so many wars in our world involve religious differences? God, why did you send your only Son to suffer and die? God, what makes people want to get married? God, why makes them want to divorce?

Our text tells us: “The Jewish Passover was near, so Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and money changers sitting at tables. He made a whip of cords and drove everyone out of the temple courts, along with the sheep and oxen. He scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those selling doves he said, “Get these things out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a place of business!”

I read a rather interesting take on the events in our Gospel of today: It's written in the first person, though the author is not given.

The day began as most any other day. I arrived at about 9am, parked my car and walked up the sidewalk to the church. The sun was shining, even though it was February. It was a beautiful thing to see. But I saw another sight that morning that was something else again.

I could hear some sort of commotion as I got closer to the door. I could hear clatter and clamor, things crashing. What is going on, I thought?

No, you can't do that! Stop! Who do you think you are? It was our janitor and one of the deacons.

I got to the door and was shocked, even horrified, to see a couple of hymnals come flying out the door. They were new hymnals, we had just bought them, even had our church's name put on the cover in gold embossing. Those rather expensive books were being thrown out the door like they were just trash by some raving lunatic.

Then came the big Bible the lectern Bible, that was given as a memorial. I don't know how much was paid for it but I knew it was very expensive. Flying out the door, flopping half opened. What kind of nut would throw around the Word of God?

Then came the furniture; a couple of pews, ripped off the floor where they had been bolted down, watch out! They came flying out the doors next.

The altar! Come on, not the altar! We had to hire 4 large football players to place it when we got it or even to move it if we wanted to change its location. How on earth did that lunatic lift it? But there it came, sailing out the door. And the paraments, all our handmade paraments, along with the banners, all came flying out the door and landed in a big pile.

I ducked just in time or the communion chalice would have cold-cocked me! Then came the hand-engraved communion paten followed by, believe it or not, the hand-carved oak baptismal font, out the door! Where are the police? Probably out writing parking tickets while our place of worship is being ravaged.

As if that wasn't enough, next came the big blue Lutheran Book of Concord followed by the offering plates and the vase that held our flowers.

The janitor came running out, his clothes half torn off, cuts and bruises on his face, screaming, Jesus is in there cleaning house!

Jesus, I asked, my Jesus, Jesus meek and mild? The compassionate Jesus? Our best friend and most loyal patron? Jesus?!

Yep, said the janitor. I saw him myself. Burst in this morning while we were praying.

Boy, is he mad! Jesus is cleaning house. That's our story so far.

Folks, to my knowledge this is the first time Jesus has been in the temple since he was a kid. He was brought in the first time as a baby in the arms of Mary to be dedicated to God. Then he was here when he was about 12. Things didn't go well that day, if you all recall, on that visit. He got into an argument with some of the biblical scholars, embarrassing them with his extensive knowledge of biblical interpretation, and him being only 12.

That was his last time in the temple until today. It's spring, Passover time, time when Jews celebrate their deliverance from Egyptian slavery. It was a religious ritual to commemorate the time when they had to bow down to the pharaoh but now they're free and now it's the Passover.

Ok, so here's a new twist! And don't get too mad at me for suggesting it.

If you were Bob Ross, how would you paint Jesus? "Here, let's put a little happy smile on Jesus. Paint a nice little robe on Him. How about we give him a nice beard, a little curly hair? Yes, just like that. Don't forget his sandals; we'll use a rustic brown for them." Was Jesus mostly serious? Did He like to joke around? We like the stories of Jesus being welcoming, non-judgmental, eating with tax collectors and "sinners."

Bob Ross probably wouldn't paint Jesus like this: "Here's a nice little happy whip. Let's put it in Jesus' hand and let him crack it at some of those there that day. Let's throw some coins over here just like that day when he flipped over the tables. Let's paint a scared cow, if we were to rearrange the letters, it would be a sacred cow, and it might have been sacred but on that day it was scared, really scared, and

we'll put him right over here. We'll paint some pigeons and doves flying, but they're happy little pigeons and doves because they just want to get out of there. And here's a little lamb, all bloody; I'll use my red here. Look, Jesus just stepped on Simeon's foot."

Jesus comes to the temple, encounters the vendors selling cattle, sheep, and doves and goes ballistic. Why? All of this is religious! The livestock are for the necessary, biblically prescribed temple sacrifice. You can't make a sacrifice to God, can't get your sins forgiven, can't get right with God without a sacrifice. The rich folks bought oxen to sacrifice; the upper middle class bought sheep; and the poorer folks bought doves. Take your sacrifice to the priest up at the altar and get tight with God.

It's kind of scary! You know, that's not all bad. It's a good thing to see. Why? Because God isn't always Mr. Happy Sunshine. He says He is slow to anger, but nonetheless that implies that He does become angry. Look at how God responds to the Israelites worshiping the golden calf in the book of Exodus. Look at the Flood. Look at Judgment Day. Don't tell me God doesn't have anger. And remember, Jesus is God.

It's good for us to think about this. There's an aversion to anger in our society. Anger is associated with hate, and hate is a big "no-no." Anger seems to be the opposite of tolerance. And we ourselves preach patience, kindness, and self-control. So getting out a whip and turning over tables doesn't seem very loving or tolerant. But anger is sometimes needed when there is danger involved. If you caught your child playing with fire, you would need to be angry to show the child the danger there is in disobeying you in that way. The child could be burned, and you need to send a clear message. There is such a thing as righteous anger. The Bible only says, "in your anger, do not sin." We have to be careful against impatient anger, and we have to be careful what we do with our anger when it is well warranted.

The disciples were not turned off by Jesus' anger. His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." They associated Jesus' anger with being "zealous." To be zealous means, "to have a deep concern for or devotion to someone or something." If you have a deep concern or devotion to someone or something, you will be angry when someone is ruining it. It shows that you love it. You care for it. You will also have strong emotions. Anger is not always a bad thing or a hateful thing. Actually, it can be a loving thing. Love and

anger sometimes go hand in hand. They aren't as foreign to each other as you might expect.

The devil wants us to tolerate sin and even celebrate it. But God's Word says that sin is harmful. Sin separates us from God, who hates sin. If we love God, we love what He loves too. We don't want to lose our relationship with Him by doing things that would ruin His reputation, estrange us from Him, or harm ourselves as well in the process.

What was Jesus' deep concern for? His Father's house. He wanted people to be coming to the synagogue to hear God's Word and see the sacrifices being made, hearing the confessions of sin and the songs being sung. Even though animals were used for sacrifice, they were turning the church into a farmyard and a marketplace. Imagine how loud and stinky it would have been in there for all of those people to be bartering for animals in the midst of worship. How would people be able to have a sense of honor and reverence for God in the middle of a barnyard? How would they be able to pay attention to the Word of God? Where would the sense of holiness be with all of that going on? Your eyes would be listening to two people bartering. You'd see another cow brought in. You'd hear the doves cooing. It would be more like a petting zoo than a place of worship. So Jesus was angry about it.

We too should be careful about the atmosphere that we have here in worship. We don't want there to be distractions from the Word of God. We want to maintain a sense of reverence. We want God's Word to be proclaimed through Word, song, and sacrament, which points to Jesus and keeps us focused on Him.

Think about how many people walked in and out of worship and never thought twice about what was going on. They felt that it was completely normal to have this going on. And maybe Jesus even let it go on without saying anything up to this point. So maybe they all thought, "There's nothing to see here."

That's a part of why we come to hear the Word of God. We have to be reminded that God is not as tolerant as we like to think. We mistake patience with acceptance. So maybe we laugh about having had too much to drink. Perhaps we think it funny when we humiliate someone online with a crude comment and think that it's no big deal when we text something about someone that is mean or judgmental. We justify it with "I'm just telling it how it is." You dig into the Word of God and you suddenly come to realize that you've sinned, and it is a big deal. Jesus is overthrowing tables. This is not a minor deal to God.

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again.” The Jews said, “It took forty-six years to build this temple! And you are going to raise it in three days?” But Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body.

This picture of the angry Jesus is kind of shocking to us. It isn't the overall picture Jesus wants us to have of Him, but it's still necessary. We see the kind Jesus. The forgiving Jesus. The merciful Jesus. We'd rather picture Him with a smile on His face. But sometimes we need to see the angry Jesus too. It reminds us that we are sinners. It reminds us that He is holy. It reminds us that we deserve God's wrath too. We can't face the holy God with tolerance. The holy God does not tolerate. We can only face Him with His own death and resurrection. And that's what Jesus came to do for us, to receive the full anger of God on Himself on the cross in order to cleanse us of our sins. That's the picture that the Holy Spirit paints for us to hold onto and believe. Christ crucified, for us and for our salvation. So today, amid the rubble of our religion, we pray: Lord Jesus, drive out our self-contrived demons, whip us into shape, clean us up, dust us off, until we are able to worship you, in word and deed, on Sunday and on Monday, and on every day, as we ought.

AMEN!!

# *“NICODEMUS WEARS A WHITE HAT”*

Message for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 10, 2024

NUMBERS 21: 4-9 — EPHESIANS 2: 1-10 — JOHN 3: 14-21

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

**W**ho wears white hats? In the old silent movie days you always knew who the good cowboys were. They wore white hats. The bad cowboys wore black hats. That way you always knew who the good cowboys were.

Today we hear one of the most cherished Bible verses of all time, John 3:16. It's the gospel in a nutshell. Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

This famous verse is spoken within a conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a white hat guy. Nicodemus was an incredibly good man. He was honest to the core. He was a Pharisee. Pharisees made it their stock in trade to keep the rules and be very, very, very good. Now understand I'm not talking about just keeping the Ten Commandments. No, the Pharisees hardly worried about them. Over the years they also added another 633 rules from the O.T. You see, the Pharisees were serious about their goodness. Nicodemus was doing his level best to be the best "white hat" Pharisee. He was depending on his goodness, his Jewish genetics to earn God's favor. He was doing a pretty good job. Good enough to be a card carrying member of the Jewish ruling council He was one of the 70 special elders of the Jewish nation. Furthermore, he was a Teacher of Israel. He had the credentials to interpret and teach others what the Holy Scriptures were saying. He was a #1 good guy. If anyone was qualified to wear a white hat, it had to be Nicodemus.

Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus in the middle of the night. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus was a man of significance. He would be well recognized by many. He doesn't want to risk being seen in the light of day, and so he comes to see Jesus at night. They enter into a theological discussion.

Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is a wise teacher. He's inspired by God. But then Jesus mentions the need to be born again of the Spirit. Nicodemus fails to understand. How can a grown person reenter their mother's womb? Jesus reminds him of an incident from the Old Testament. This is where our reading today tunes in. Moses and the Israelites were in the wilderness.

God had been providing for all of Israel's needs. Manna fell from heaven every morning. Flocks of quail would land near the Israelites' encampment and provided meat. Moses struck a rock and water issued forth.

But as time progressed, the Israelites became impatient and grumpy. They complained against God and Moses. And so God sent poisonous snakes into the Israelite camp. They bit the people. The snake crisis forces Israel to acknowledge their rebellious attitude and repent. So God instructs Moses to fabricate a poisonous snake out of bronze. He elevated it on a pole so that everyone could see it. Whenever someone was bitten by a snake, they looked up at the bronze snake and were made well.

Paradoxically, the Israelites are instructed to look at the very thing that is killing them in order to be saved. It forced them to come to terms with the poison within them – not the snake venom, but their faithless, self-centered mindset. In other words, they have to be confronted with their sinful nature. Jesus tells Nicodemus that the same thing is going to occur with him. Jesus will be “lifted up” and whoever looks up to him will live.

Although Jesus doesn't mention the cross per se, as people standing on this side of the cross, we understand Jesus is pointing to his crucifixion. Crucifixion was a ghastly and cruel death. It's been said that the Romans didn't invent crucifixion, but they perfected it. It was not uncommon for the roads leading into a Roman city to be lined with hundreds of criminals who were crucified. Most famously, Spartacus and his army were crucified along the Appian Way leading into Rome.

Crucifixion was intended to humiliate and torture the one being crucified. At the same time, it intimidated the rest of the populous into submission. People looked

up at the ones being crucified, and they cowered in fear.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that just as the bronze serpent became the means to the Israelite's salvation, he is going to become the agency for God's plan to save the world. Paradoxically, as the world lifts their eyes to witness the act of Jesus' humiliating and torturous death, they will see the means to their own salvation. Jesus summarizes what's going on in his most famous quote:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.” This brief statement encapsulates the entire gospel message, the Gospel in a nutshell.

I want to share a couple of stories with you that show the love or lack thereof, of us humans.

A father and his son were arguing; not really sure of what but the son said, Look, Dad, I didn't ask to be born; and the father said, If you had, the answer would have been No! There's the story of the couple who were trying to adopt a child from the local orphanage. They finally decided to adopt this one little boy. The three of them and an orphanage employee all met together to discuss the upcoming adoption. Up to this point, it was pretty much cut and dried that the adoption would go thru; as they were talking, the father asked the little boy, Do you have a bicycle; No sir I don't. No problem we'll get you one. Do you have roller skates; no sir, I don't. We'll get you a pair. What about a big screen TV for your bedroom? Again, no sir, I've never had anything like that. We'll get you one that you like. The day for the finalizing of the adoption arrived; we're here to take you home the parents said. I've changed my mind; I'm going to stay here at the orphanage. Well, why, what happened to change your mind? I don't want all those things; yes they're nice, but I just want to be loved and I am here!! The depth of God's love-God so loved the world that He gave His only Son; He didn't give a bicycle, a pair of roller skates, or even that nice TV; He gave His only Son out of His great love for us.

In viewing Jesus' crucifixion, we see the great depth of God's love. As Jesus is lifted on the cross, the full magnitude of God's love for the world comes to light. It's a love so overwhelming it's willing to give itself away for the sake of the world. This divine love becomes real in the person of Jesus. Through taking on human flesh and approaching his destiny on the cross, Jesus was willing to forfeit his own life in order to save a fallen world.

Jesus invites Nicodemus to believe in him. He wants Nicodemus to believe that he's more than just a wise rabbi; he's the love of God made flesh; he's the means of divine reconciliation.

That word "believe" comes up five times in our brief passage from John. What does it mean to believe? We believe that the world is round. Is believing in Jesus like that?

On one level, belief can mean the acknowledgment of facts. We believe that today is Sunday. We believe High Voltage warning signs when we see them.

On non-Communion Sunday mornings we recite the Apostles' Creed. We confess that we believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Does this mean that we're making a simple statement of acknowledgment? "Yes, Joe Biden is my president, Andy Beshear is the governor of the Commonwealth of KY and Mike DeWine is the governor of Ohio, and Jesus is my savior."

This isn't what we mean when we say that we BELIEVE in Jesus. Jesus was getting at something much more substantial. Believing in Jesus has to do with placing faith in him. It's about trust.

There's a famous story about the great tightrope artist, Charles Blondin. In the summer of 1859, Blondin strung a tightrope across the span of Niagara Falls. The wire stretched over a quarter of a mile in length and 160 feet above the base of the falls.

He proceeded to walk back and forth between the Canadian and US falls. A huge crowd watched his daring feat. He upped the ante by adding various challenges: he crossed on a bicycle, he ventured the span walking backwards, he pushed a wheelbarrow.

Each time he asked the crowd, "So do you think I can cross on a bicycle? Do you think I can cross blindfolded? Do you think I can cross pushing a wheelbarrow?" Every time, the crowd enthusiastically responded, "Yes!"

At last he asked, "Do you think I can cross the falls if I'm pushing someone inside the wheelbarrow?" The crowd replied, "Yes!"

And then he asked them, "Who will get in the wheelbarrow and cross with me?" And to that question, nobody said they would! When they said they believed in his

abilities, they didn't mean that they trusted him enough to place their fate in his hands.

Jesus invites Nicodemus – and us – to believe in him with a full, abiding trust. This belief is more than an intellectual acknowledgment. It's a deep-seated trust in the power of his love to support us in every way. Jesus calls us to rest in him with the same kind of confident trust that a small child has for its parent.

Why, we ask. Why should we so completely trust and rely on him? Jesus points to the highest expression of divine love: his cross. Only there can we see the full measure of the love which sent him to dwell with us. It's the proof positive that nothing, nothing at all, has been withheld for our sake. Nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the cross we see a love as expansive as the entire world. This love encompasses all that God has made, all that God has brought into creation. As Christ is lifted up on the cross, this great divine love comes into focus. And there we come to trust a divine love that will not let us go.

Let this love define you. Maybe there are ways the world sends you messages that you aren't worth loving. Maybe you're quaking under an overwhelming sense that you don't measure up. I ask you, what are you to believe? These other voices? Where are you to place your trust? Listen to Jesus' answer to Nicodemus. It's the same truth for you: look up to the cross. It's the ultimate sign of God's love for you. Look on the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord, and believe that you are God's beloved.

AMEN!!

# *“DO YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?”*

Message for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 17, 2024

JEREMIAH 31: 31-34 — HEBREWS 5: 5-10 — JOHN 12: 20-33

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

**T**he great statesman, Winston Churchill, once said, “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.” That proverbial statement best captures the meaning of this season we call, Lent. Lent is that liturgical season of the church’s calendar year, where we focus on the cost of following Christ. Lent is a time of penance, prayer, preparation for or recollection of our baptism in Christ as we prepare for the celebration of Easter. Observance of Lent is as old as the 4th century. It began on Ash Wednesday, the 40th weekday before Easter and it ends at midnight Holy Saturday. Lent is that time of year, where we turn our attention to the cross. We focus on that which God, the father, has given us and we are challenged to go forth and do likewise. Lent is about losing our lives by giving them to Christ and getting eternal life by finding Christ within us. Lent is about loss. It’s about losing ourselves in order to find our lives. Jesus declares that he who loves his life loses it and he who hates his life will keep it for eternal life. Where you and I are now, in our lives, in our struggles, in our cares, and in our issues, it is all about losing. One can say in fact that this is a season for losers. Now, a loser by our social standards is one who has failed to accomplish any relevant success or significance in his life. But by God’s standards a loser is one who has totally immersed his life in the will and way of Jesus. This is a season for losers. Jesus is looking for losers.

Many of us are saying to ourselves, ‘I’ve already lost so much. What else is there for me to lose? How much more do I have to endure in order to come out of this experience with some sense of dignity? How much more can I lose?’

And yet, with all that you have lost, God wants you to know still that there is more of you to lose. The essence of the gospel-the good news of Jesus Christ- is about loss. An authentic gospel begins with loss. It begins with dying. It begins with the cross. And if the gospel that you hear preached on the radio, the television, or wherever, does not begin with a cross, if it does not begin by telling you that something in you has to die, it is not the true gospel. The true gospel is not just about your coming to Jesus as you are, it's about your being baptized in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's about your losing your former life and gaining a new life in Christ. This season is about losing. It's about loss.

Some of us have trouble coming to church and losing something. We came to get something. We came to get a blessing-be it financial, relational, and spiritual. We came to get an encouraging word, some hope for tomorrow, and some assurance that everything is going to be all right. Many of us came to get something or someone. We did not come to lose. We have been taught to come to church seeking a blessing, praying to get -never to lose. After all, who sets out on a journey to lose? That doesn't make sense. We have been told that in this world, it is best to be a winner. It's best to get all that you can get and to do all that you can to hold on to what you have gotten. No one wants to lose.

But following Jesus is a mattering of losing. It is a matter of letting go. Our modern philosophy of life is a matter of holding on and hanging in. We've been trained to say, "oh I'm just holding on. I'm hanging on in there." Day in and day out- we struggle to hold on to our job, to hold on to our house, to hold on to our family, and to hold on to our money. Jesus' words that "we must lose our lives" create for many of us a conflict of interest. This morning, like Jesus, our souls are troubled. We can't sleep. We are overworked and underpaid. Our minds are constantly going. We are walking on eggshells, looking over shoulders, and waiting for some disastrous event to occur. We are mentally and physically on heightened alert. Our souls are troubled. And yet, for the sake of the gospel, we, the called, the chosen, the church, the disciples of Christ, but not that church, must maintain our faith and assurance. Although we are living in a world of loss, we must still act as if everything is fine because as we go through, many are watching us and seeking the presence of Jesus in our lives. The world is looking at us. Society is watching us seeking to see Jesus through us and in us. They want to see Jesus. Everyday of our lives, in our sittings and risings, there are those around us who just want to see Jesus. They do not want to get caught up in our church politics. They do not want to see our beautiful building, hear our wonderful music, or taste our good food during fellowship hour. They want to see Jesus. They don't want to hear you talking gossip about the other church members. They want to see

Jesus. They don't want to hear your personal opinions, and thoughts about the pastor. They want to see Jesus. Show me Jesus. All week, I've seen bombs dropping, people dying, and politicians lying. But right now, show me Jesus.

No wonder, Jesus' soul was so troubled. He spent the majority of his life, showing his disciples and the people signs and wonders, yet they still did not believe. He spent his life preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God, about blessedness, righteousness and truth; yet they still did not believe. He spent his life healing the sick, casting out devils, and raising the dead; yet, they still did not believe. And at this eleventh hour of his life, people are coming to see him perform, and prove that he is the Christ, so that they may believe. And likewise people are coming to you to see Jesus, so that they may believe. That is why it is important for you to watch what you say. What you are saying now during these troubling times will determine your destiny with Christ. Your response while you are going through this season of trouble will determine your next level of glory. Jesus says, "What shall I say. They want to see me at my best but I'm about to go through the worst period of my life, the cross. What shall I say?"

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall inherit the kingdom of God. So, watch what you say? Yes, my soul is troubled, so what will I say? Shall I complain, groan, and moan. Shall I cuss, fuss, and fight? Shall I criticize, scrutinize, and scandalize? What will I say?

Many of us who are going through a dark time in our lives, may be saying the wrong type of prayer. Jesus, declared, "What shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. He accepted what God was about to take him through. You are here for such a time as this. Solomon said that for every matter under heaven there is a time and a season; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.' This is your season. God has prepared you for this season so that he may be glorified. You are wondering why? He is telling you, So that he can be glorified. So that when you come through this, people without question, without a word of doubt, will know that it was nothing but the grace of God that brought you through.

The rest of the words I have long since forgotten, it's been so long ago, but the chorus of an old vacation Bible school song started out: "Do you know what time it is?" The second line would then answer, 'Time to serve the Lord.' The simplicity of that song's question and answer masks what can be a very complex and lifelong learning for us all. Namely, the discerning of what time it is. To be sure, we have the precision of calendars, which help us pinpoint the movement of

days, and which, last Sunday, told us to move our clocks ahead an hour for DST; of course, many of us hated to lose that hour of sleep but we had no choice and besides, we have an extra hour of daylight; our calendars also tell us that this Tuesday will be the first day of spring and there's a chance of snow! We have quartz clocks to help us pinpoint the movement of hours and minutes and even milliseconds. We have government to tell us when it is time for a child to enter school, when a teenager can get a driver's license, or when a youth attains the right to vote. We measure our life by seasons. The writer of Ecclesiastes wrote: 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; A time to plant, and a time to reap.'

There are other 'times' whose coming are not so easily or precisely measured. When is the right time for two people to get married? When is the right time for a parent to tell a child about drugs or sex, STD's and pregnancy? When is the right time for artificial life support to be withdrawn from a comatose patient? In situations like those, 'do you know what time it is?' can be the most bothersome of questions to face. Knowing the times and what they involve requires the weighing of a great many factors, and ultimately, a decision followed by 'timely' action.

"Do you know what time it is?" is a question implied throughout the Gospel of John. Some seven times in the first half of this Gospel, Jesus refers to an hour or time coming but not yet here. Twice John has explained that Jesus escaped those who wanted to seize and arrest him by simply saying, "His hour had not yet come." But our passage today makes a pivotal shift, moving from Jesus' ministry to his passion by indicating 'the hour has come.' And the mystery about the coming hour's possibilities is replaced with unsettling clarity about its realities.

So what time is it? The first clue is concealed within the opening words, 'among those who went up to worship at the festival...' The festival is Passover, commemorating God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Remember what happened; lambs were sacrificed and their blood was smeared over the doorpost of Jewish homes in Egypt. When the angel of death descended, those homes so marked were 'passed over' while those without it suffered the loss of their first-born son. Passover remembered this time when God acted to save his people. The Jewish faithful would travel from far and wide to be present in Jerusalem for this most holy of days, celebrating God's definitive act of salvation.

Connecting the feast of Passover to Jesus' impending hour is far more than a coincidence of calendar dates for John. In the opening chapter, the first words spoken about Jesus by another person are those of John the Baptist, 'Behold the

Lamb of God!’ Before Jesus does anything at all, his coming is linked with the lamb of Passover. To seal the deal, so to speak, John’s chronology of Holy Week, starting next Sunday, differs from the other three Gospels in one crucial point. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Jesus eats the Passover meal with his disciples and is crucified the following day. In John: Jesus is crucified a day earlier, on the eve of Passover, which means he ends up dying at the very time when the lamb in the temple is slain. It’s as if John seeks to imply a New Passover is to take place, a New Lamb is to be offered, a new act of God’s salvation is to take place. Which is precisely the message John offers, even if it is precisely the time Jesus announces.

Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.’ Today’s Gospel hints God’s glory will be revealed in another visible act of God’s power for the sake of giving life. The hour of Jesus’ glorification has come. The question is, what will this time of glorification bring; what is God about to do through Christ for our sake? “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. If it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Jesus teaches how God’s glory will come in this hour; in a grain of wheat that must die before fruit may be borne; in the seeming contradiction that loving life means losing life, and hating life means keeping life. The words have an abrasive edge to them, even as does the experience to which they point. The starkness of Jesus’ images of the time strip away false expectations that it is an hour of glory to be taken lightly, or one which comes without demands.

When God acts on our behalf, a response is expected, a covenant is sought. Sometimes we might think it would be easier if God just stayed hidden. We might be able to dismiss God’s claim on us if God remained outside our experience. We might even be able to keep God at arm’s length if we could relegate God’s actions to the safety of the past or the future; in other words, if God’s time was limited to what has been or what will be. However, the glory of God reveals itself in that moment we call ‘now.’ Now has the hour come. Today is the day of salvation.

Having announced the arrival of the hour and taught its meaning in the figures of a wheat grain and a love/hate relationship with life; having done all this, Jesus still goes on to say about this moment; “now my soul is troubled; what shall I say?”

But this hour also reveals trust. Jesus recognizes that this hour has been the reason for all of his hours. The purpose for which he has come is linked to the imminence of Jesus’ passion; shadows and tragedy, betrayal and desertion, misunderstanding

and death. Still, His trust is that through all these things, somehow, what is about to happen is God's glorification. This will be a public doing of God's saving purposes; like a dying grain of wheat which, when buried, will bear much fruit. So Jesus concludes: 'Father, glorify your name!'

When all is said and done, the great advantage Jesus holds over both disciples and opponents in the Gospels, and especially in John, is that he knows, he knows what time it is. The disciples will have to wait for the day of resurrection for their sense of time to be corrected. The opponents will seek to deny Jesus his time, but in doing so, they will only succeed in creating his hour. For the hour they deem to be crucifixion is the hour God RE-deems to be glorification.

Do we know what time it is? That old VBS song I mentioned at the beginning answered that with 'Time to serve the Lord.' The answer Jesus gave grown men and women was "If anyone serves me, he must follow me." May we know what time it is by knowing whose time it is, and in knowing, then following the One whose hour has come; the One whose cross is the glory of God for this world's salvation.

The cross was before Jesus. His heart was troubled. Should He pray that God the Father save Him from this approaching hour? "No," Jesus said. "It was for this very reason I came..." "The Son of Man must be lifted up" on the tree of the cross for then Satan's grasp of fear on the hearts of men and women will be shattered like glass on a stone pavement.

AMEN!!