

Sundays of Lent 2026 Messages

From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)

Russell, Kentucky

Ash Wednesday – Feb. 18– “The Word We Hate The Most”

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“The Word We Hate The Most”

Message for *Ash Wednesday*

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 18, 2026

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 WENT TO THE CROSS FOR US BUT NOW, HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Before we get into the meat and potatoes of my message, I want to let you know what its title is: “The Word We Hate the Most.” Maybe you already know the answer; maybe not, but think about it. The Word We Hate the Most!

Our text tonight opens with these words: “Jesus said to the disciples: Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Something has always bothered me about Ash Wednesday. What exactly is ‘Ash Wednesday?’ Where does it come from? It’s definitely not in the Bible. You can scour every page of scripture but you won’t find the two words ‘ash’ and ‘Wednesday’ together. But some of its ideas are.

Here we are, at the start of another Lenten journey, a journey of 40 days, leading up to the most horrendous form of execution ever devised by man but used specifically on the Son of Man, Jesus Christ himself. We’re talking about the cross of course.

Before we go any further and we will during this season of Lent, let me ask you: What kind of love would choose the cross when it had every power to walk away? We are reminded in Isaiah that it wasn't nails that held Jesus to the cross, but redeeming, deliberate, sacrificial love. Jesus Christ did not endure suffering because He was trapped, but because He willingly chose to give Himself for us. He took our place. On a day when the world often speaks of love sentimentally as we did this past Saturday, Valentine's Day, we need to be reminded of the love of God – the kind of love that rescues, redeems, and saves.

Every year we read the same lessons from our Bible: Joel 2, Psalm 51, 2 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 6. Matthew 6 instructs us to 'Beware of practicing your piety before others.' Sometimes pastors will expound on this text which they would if they use the Gospel as the basis for their message and will talk about the importance of our faith being lived out in our deeds, not in simple signs that draw attention to ourselves. Then we adorn ourselves with a symbol, a cross of ashes on our foreheads, sometimes on the hands, and then we go out into the world for all to see. That's not practicing your piety.

It almost seems a little hypocritical. In many modern churches, we tend to accommodate people's daily schedules by worshiping in the evening, like we do here, so most of us then simply go home afterward, rather than parading around town all day with a cross on our foreheads. But still, and yet...

Ash Wednesday has its origins in the early Christian Church – somewhere between the sixth and eighth centuries. Originally, the idea was that a Christian, as a sign of repentance, would sprinkle ashes on his or her head.

Where did this idea come from? In the Bible, ashes were always associated with humility and mortality, fasting and remorse. If you had sinned against God, and you felt remorse about that

sin, and you were repenting of that sin, then sometimes, in the Bible, you would sprinkle ashes on your head as a sign of sorrow and repentance. Ashes were supposed to remind you that you were mortal, that you will eventually become ashes after you die. We're only ashes, and we need to repent of our sins now while God gives us a time of grace.

All other reasoning aside, what's important is not whether you have ashes on your forehead; what's important is what's going on in your heart; what's going on in your soul.

We keep a lot about ourselves hidden. We have secret thoughts, secret desires, secret feelings. We have a lot to keep hidden. We hide things from one another because we're ashamed of what's inside of us.

Others may think we have a pure heart, but we know that impure thoughts have often entered our heart. Others may think we are unselfish, but we know how much selfishness remains within us. Others may think we are strong and courageous, but we know how weak and afraid we really are.

I don't believe we ever come to know anyone completely. You can experience every possible intimacy with someone, you can live with someone through the passage of years, you can share great joys and great sorrows with someone, and you will still not know everything about them. People will still surprise and sometimes shock you. There is an inner part of people we never see. There is a hidden part of ourselves we never reveal.

In today's Scripture from Matthew's Gospel Jesus directs our attention to our hidden life. He draws the contrast between our outward appearance to others and our inner spiritual reality.

Jesus tells us that we can easily become caught in the contradiction of audiences. On the outside we can appear to be seeking God, or trying to do what's right; but on the inside we can be preoccupied with making a certain impression on other people. It's not God's approval we're seeking, but the applause of others.

For every Christian, ashes or not, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the somber season of Lent. Lent is a forty day span of time from now until Easter. During this time, we focus on Christ's battle with sin and Satan that he waged in order to win for us our salvation. The 40 days of Lent do not include Sundays, because each Sunday is considered a "miniature Easter," a time of joy and celebration of Christ's resurrection. During Lent, though, even on Sundays, we will be talking about the battles that Christ fought for us on our behalf.

Why 40 days? Right after Jesus was baptized, the Bible tells us that Jesus went out into the desert to fast and to be tempted by the Devil for 40 days. For Jesus, those 40 days were a time of introspection, a time when he battled the temptations of the Devil and emerged stronger than he had been before. For us, Lent is a time when we make that journey with Christ. We think about OUR temptations, our sins, and we repent. Take note of the color purple we are using today, a color always associated with repentance in the Christian church. After these 40 days, we emerge stronger than we had been before.

Lent is a time to evaluate yourself in light of God's Word. It's a time to abandon the sins you have grown accustomed to committing in your life. It's a time to receive God's forgiveness and strength to lead a Christian life. It's a time to renew your desire to serve God, and to be the Christians that God has made you to be.

If you were to count all the sins you have committed in just one week - and remember, sins include not just your deeds, but your thoughts. Sins include not just the things you do, but the things you don't do, but should. If you were to count all these sins, your offenses would be many. Thousands, millions of sins, testifying against you in God's court of law.

“Our offenses are ever with us. We acknowledge our iniquities” – there you see a key phrase as we think about Lent this evening. Lent is a time when you look at yourself, and acknowledge that there are some things that need to be fixed up. There are some things about me that are not perfect, things that need to be changed, things that need to be adjusted. My attitudes. My lifestyle.

Are these sins you have committed in your life? Take a close look at yourself, and ask yourself some hard questions – what are my sins? Where am I “not so Christian” in my life? What kind of person am I? Am I really loving? Do I show that in my words and actions? Am I really patient? Do I really love God more than anything else in my life? Do I make sacrifices for him? Am I peaceful? Or, do I like to fight, to assert my will over other people? What kind of person am I? What are my weaknesses? What are my sins? Where do I need to get better in my life?

That is the first part of repentance, the first part of Lent. To look at yourself and to recognize your sins. And then comes the second - to look away from yourself, and to Christ. Before Jesus became a man, he looked out over the world and saw all our sin, and he was appalled at what he saw. And what appalled Jesus the most, was that there was no one to intervene, no one to rescue the human race from its sins.

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:

“When you fast, don’t look dismal, like the hypocrites. They disfigure their faces so as to show others that they’re fasting.”

Jesus instructs us, "When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting won't be seen by others, but only your Father in heaven."

Jesus' words here, spoken in the context of Ash Wednesday, suggest that this season isn't meant to be one filled with artificial somberness or pained lament.

No, these acts are meant to stir up faith, to kindle something new within.

Ash Wednesday calls us to remember our mortality. We are finite creatures! Our days are numbered. One day, we all will die.

Jim Valvano, the coach of the North Carolina State University's 1983 NCAA basketball champions, was known for his up-front, cards-on-the-table attitude. When he quit coaching at NC State under a cloud of scandal, instead of seeking some low visibility position, Valvano took a job with ABC and ESPN as a sports announcer. Then, a few years later, he was diagnosed with a virulent, fast-spreading form of cancer. Again, he chose to stay out front. Instead of retreating to the sidelines of life, he kept working - through chemotherapy, hair loss, weight loss, radiation therapy, gray days and good days. Just before he died, he was given the Arthur Ashe Award for Courage. In his acceptance speech, Valvano spoke about how dying of cancer had taught him how to live:

"We should do this every day of our lives," he said. "Number one is laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. Number three is, you should have your emotions moved to tears. If you laugh, you think, you cry," he said, "that's a full day."

As I close, I'm wondering if you have figured out what is the most hated word in the English language. The word relates directly to Lent.

Give up? The word is "no." We hate the word no, but for Lent we are called to embrace it—to say "no" to those things that keep us from praying, fasting, and giving. To say "no" to being showy and ostentations about praying, fasting, and giving. To say "no" to bragging about our disciplines of praying, fasting, and giving. We can do it...just say "No!"

In Isaiah 53: 4-6: "Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows... But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." That word iniquity is all about our primary problem, sin. Jesus was crucified for our sins, each and every one of us. All nailed with Him to the cross.

"The nails did not hold Jesus there... He stayed because love would not let Him go."

"The cross becomes the place where unseen grief was fully handled by visible love, the love that held the nails."

"Those nails did not hold Him to the cross. Love did. Limitless, deliberate, redeeming love held Him there for me, for you, for the soldier, for the crowd, for the world. And I have never looked at iron the same way again."

If I was preparing a Valentine's Day message, I would look at how the world defines love, by emotion and romance. But tonight, we're talking about love in the cross. Tonight and as we go through Lent to that dastardly thing called the cross, let's put aside our feelings on surface level affection and look deeper into a love that bore our grief, carried our sin, and

refused to step down. There is no greater love to proclaim than the love that held the nails.

May God bless you as you begin your Lenten journey.

Amen.

“NOT GIVING UP ON GOD’S AGENDA”

Message for the first Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 22, 2026

GENESIS 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7 ** ROMANS 5: 12-19 ** MATTHEW 4: 1-11

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

Ask almost anyone who’s had American history, who’s living in the United States, ask them who ‘discovered’ America and without a moment’s hesitation they will probably say Christopher Columbus. It’s a well-known fact, so well known that many of us can lapse into a chorus about the guy who ‘sailed the ocean blue, in 14 hundred and 92.’ Except, there are holes in that story.

First of all, his name was Cristoforo Columbo; he was Italian after all. And it’s rumored he was half-Jewish.

Then there is the considerable problem: how do you ‘discover’ a land that is already inhabited, as we know the Western Hemisphere was. And what do we do with the fact that the Vikings ‘discovered’ and were living in what is now Canada sometime around the year 1000. The Columbus story is so ingrained in people’s minds that tampering with it can be very problematic. Such is the case with this morning’s reading from Genesis.

Few biblical stories, Christmas, Easter, and the Exodus aside, are as familiar as this one. But it has been tampered with so much and layered with theology that we may be reluctant to read it in a new light. But we must do that, for there is much that is and is not in this text.

The tendency at the beginning of this season of Lent is to pick up and run with some idea of original sin lifted from this passage. Saint Augustine tried it centuries ago. But look closely, there is no evidence to original sin, either literally or

metaphorically. There is indeed what we can call sin; a major breakdown in the relationship between human beings and God, and arguably it is original in the sense of not having a precedent in Genesis. But the theology that suggests every person since Adam and Eve is born corrupt and evil because of the so-called apple incident is far-fetched at best and unscriptural at worst.

So why do we have this story? We humans have some big questions about life. Why do we have to work so hard? Why can't we just sit around in paradise and eat whatever we want? Why is childbirth such an incredible ordeal for women, especially at a time when there were no epidural shots or Lamaze classes? Women frequently died bringing new life into the world; surely that didn't make sense. Did God make a mistake? Was/Is God not as loving as we first thought? Or did we somehow botch it up?

The real key to this story is that God is indeed present. Despite blatantly doing the one thing that God told them not to do, God does not kill Adam and Eve or even that wily serpent who seems to have started the whole chain of events. No, God remains with them. Forever. The couple have to leave the garden, sent out of paradise into what we call 'the real world.' Then again it's the only world we know.

And God does not stay back in the wonderful garden that he created and leave them alone; no, he goes with them. Thankfully, He's still with us too,

So we move to our Gospel, again the same we had last year for the first Sunday in Lent. And I want to start off with two assumptions. The first is that the temptations in the wilderness were real temptations and that Jesus really, truly, all the way, heart, mind, and soul, and body suffered those temptations because he is and was fully human. They're not a trick or some illusion. We can't have it both ways; we cannot say Jesus experienced everything we did, except sin and temptation. Either the temptations were real or the whole story is pointless and the incarnation, the birth of Jesus in the flesh, wasn't one. Either Jesus was fully human or he wasn't; and if he wasn't, I have nothing further to say on this subject, ever! And that might please some of you a great deal.

The second assumption is that the opening verse of the Gospel lesson means exactly what it says. I know you heard it a few moments ago but listen again: "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness." Jesus was led by the Spirit, of God; Jesus was not, repeat not, led by the devil. Jesus, the same person that we heard a voice from heaven had just said, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am

well pleased” was promptly led by the Spirit, of God, into the wilderness to be tempted.

Folks, God’s universe is not dualistic. There are not two gods; there is only one. We’ve known that since Sunday school. As our Jewish friends say, and my Yiddish is terrible, so translated, it’s “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God alone!”

Temptation is probably the most familiar experience of the Christian. While some may be tempted more than others, all will be tempted. Someone once said, ‘Have you ever wondered why opportunity knocks once, yet temptation bangs on the door constantly?’

I believe there is a great deal that we can learn from the temptations of Christ as found in Matthew 4 and also in Luke 4. I am firmly convinced that there are some basic principles and similarities between the temptations of Jesus and our temptations.

Jesus was not tempted so that the Father could learn anything about His Son. Jesus was tempted so that every creature in Heaven and on earth might know that Jesus Christ is the mighty conqueror. Jesus was also tempted so that Satan and his tactics could be exposed.

By studying the temptation of our Lord by Satan, we learn a great deal about our adversary, Satan. To know the methods of our enemy, the Devil, we are forewarned and forearmed as to the temptations by which he will seek to destroy us.

A pastor once told his congregation about a man who had a dog, and the man was trying to train his dog to be obedient. And what he would do was to take a large piece of meat, good, red, juicy meat that dogs would normally like to eat, and he would put it in the middle of the floor near the dog and then he would say, “No,” to the dog. Well, the first few times the “No,” was an irrelevant suggestion, the dog proceeded to grab the meat and got wailed on, and after a few such results when he said, “No,” the dog no longer attacked the meat.

But what the man noticed was this; the dog never looked at the meat anymore. When he put the meat on the floor, the dog never for a moment took his eyes off his master. Seemingly feeling that if he did so the temptation to disobey would be too great, so he just maintained a steadfast gaze into the face of his master.

The greatest way to experience victory is a steadfast gaze into the face of the Master who has been there and shown us the path of victory.

If anything this passage is designed for us to take our eyes off the temptation, focus them on the Master who was victorious in all points though tempted like as we are yet without sin. If we will do this, we will be able to enter into His victory. That's what this passage is going to do for us.

Temptation is common to all of us; victory is not so common. The problem is we look at the object and not the Master. Maybe this morning this will help us change that.

Jesus was tempted after His baptism and after the divine acknowledgment from Heaven as to who He was. It was a significant time in the life of Christ when Satan attacked Him.

“Then” - there is an emphasis laid upon that. Immediately after the heavens were opened to Him, and the Spirit descended on Him, and He was declared to be the Son of God; the next news we hear of him is, He is tempted! Special privileges and special tokens of divine favor, will not prevent us from being tempted.

He was baptized to identify the Savior of sinners with those He came to save. He chose to deliberately identify Himself with Adam's ruined race.

He was baptized not because He was a sinner but because we were, and He had come to take our place.

Again, who was being tempted? It was the man, Jesus who was being tempted.

We must recognize that Jesus did not use His divine powers to overcome the enemy. Jesus used the spiritual resources that are available to us today.

Jesus used the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God to defeat the devil. He was teaching us to trust in the eternal Word of God. Jesus could have used an angelic force to overcome Satan. Jesus could have exercised his deity. A single word from His mouth would have sent the tempter back to his infernal den, but instead He used three words, "IT IS WRITTEN."

With all the choice of weapons which He might have selected to use, and yet He used the Word of God. Let us grasp and hold precious the blessed Book as our only weapon of warfare when dealing with the devil. Cast away human reasoning and human eloquence. Arm yourself with the Word of God. It is safest to meet temptation, not by your own reasonings and thoughts, but by the Word which cannot lie.

Jesus chose to use the Word when He was all alone. The Bible has value in public as well as private use.

Like some of these scam artists who disguise the real truth, and use AI or something like it to confuse and deceive, the devil will use the Word of God when he needs to. However, Satan cleverly omitted words; he cleverly omitted the context. Any text without a context is a pretext.

You leave the WORD of God and go to reasoning, and you are easy game for the Devil. Do not attempt to reason with the Devil; use the eternal Word on him. The devil's first goal in the garden of Eden was to disarm Eve by robbing her of the only weapon she had, the Word of God.

Notice as well, that geography will not protect you from temptation. Jesus was in the wilderness, on the temple pinnacle, and on a high mountain, and in each place, He was still tempted. Jesus was tempted in the holy city at the highest point of the temple.

How does the temptation of the Lord relate to me? Jesus was tempted and was victorious over temptation. As a result the message for us is two fold.

First, there is no need for despair.

Most people find temptation depressing and discouraging. They feel that they must be wicked to be tempted.

Temptation does not indicate sin. Jesus was tempted, and yet He did not sin. God had but one Son without corruption, but He had none without temptation.

Christ was not wicked; He was without sin. The real reason that you are tempted is because you are important. Satan wants to make you sin because you are important. The nearer and dearer any child of God is to the Son of God, the more Satan may trouble you.

Second, the message for the believer is there is no room for defeat.

Jesus had the authority and the power to tell the devil to leave, but instead He employed the written Word of God. As Man He was showing us how we too may be victorious in the hour of temptation.

Jesus showed us how to handle the selected weapon, the Word of God. Always be ready with it

How can you and I defeat that old serpent? It will not be by our own good intentions or resolutions or will power.

In our text, Jesus demonstrated the protective power of the Word of God.

We need to know WHAT is written and WHERE it is written, and WHY it was written and then, thunder its truths in the ear of the serpent, "IT IS WRITTEN!"

The devil didn't leave Jesus forever after the wilderness. When he leaves, he only does temporarily. He will come again. The devil is after you and me, like a wild animal stalking its prey.

The devil may retreat, but he will return. Be ready for him by arming yourself with the Bible. As long as we have life, we will be tempted. Not all in the same way. Not all at the same time. But, all of us will be tempted. Constant, daily vigilance is required. At our weakest moment. When we are proudest of our achievements. When we think more highly of ourselves than we should. When we give in to doubt, worry and despair. Beware. You will be tempted when you least expect it.

As we begin the Lenten season, may you, like Jesus when He was tempted, find strength and grace to stand. May His Word be the rock upon which we stand. Our Heavenly Father will strengthen us. And, if we fall, will also lift us again because He loves us eternally.

Amen.

“START ACTING LIKE A CHILD”

Message for the Second Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 1, 2026

GENESIS 12: 1-4a ** ROMANS 4: 1-5, 13-17 ** JOHN 3: 1-17

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

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus offers Nicodemus the opportunity to journey into the wilderness, not by giving up a geographical home as Abram and Sarai do in the Genesis text, “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’ and concludes with ‘So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.’” Nicodemus is giving up all that he knows about the territory of his soul and spirit, by giving up his familiar inner environment.

As we travel together through this scripture, it is important to remember that the story was written into our holy texts not because it tells us something about Nicodemus but because it tells us something about ourselves. The dialog between Nicodemus and Jesus is given to us as a mirror reflecting our own questions, and, I suspect, our own resistance to giving up what is safe and familiar!

The central question that Nicodemus asks is: How can anyone be born after having grown old? Jesus responds that one is born a second time not of flesh, but of water and ‘Pneuma’ or breath, wind, Spirit.

Any Christian disciple knows that the water of Baptism signifies a new birth. It is obviously not a new physical birth in the body; we don’t ‘enter a second time into our mother’s womb’ as Nicodemus suggests. But it is a new birth during which we accept a new name: disciple.

Show of hands, How many of you like to change? Seriously how many of you like to change? What if I asked you if you wished you were still a baby?

It seems we have a gut reaction to the idea of change, especially in church. We think it's a negative thing, a scary thing. The idea of change opens up doors that can seem risky. What might happen next? Often, it appears, we'd rather not know.

The story of the call of Abram is about change. Before we discuss that part, there's a couple of things worth noting. First is the shorter version of his name, Abram, it's not a typo. Second God does not ask Abram to leave, but rather he tells him to. Not in a negative or angry way, necessarily, but without room for debate. The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

In those days that was almost exclusively a negative thing. This is long before the days of email, texting, or a quick phone call to the folks back home, even before 'snail mail.' To leave meant "Go and don't plan on ever coming back." It's not some casual think about it and let me know leave but leave; there is a finality to it all.

Next Sunday is the first day of Daylight Savings Time; we turn our clocks ahead which seems like we did just yesterday!. It will be darker when we wake up but we have more daylight at the end of the day. For now, it's darker in the mornings. Our gospel story today takes place in the wee morning hours between Nicodemus and Jesus.

There are nocturnal animals who spend their active hours in the night, but that doesn't come naturally for we humans. If we're up at night, something's going on.

Sometimes people do things in the night so as to conceal their actions. The case of Nancy Guthrie is a case in point. She was taken from her home and her bed around 1am in the morning. As of today, sadly, that case still remains open and she has never been found. We pray for her recovery, however that may be.

It's also hard to get around when it's dark. Streets look different in the middle of the night than they do in daylight. The familiar landmarks are lost in the darkness. The shadowy landscape leaves us uncertain.

And then when you do encounter a bright light, it's quite blinding. Oncoming headlights glare and eclipse everything around them.

We're just not built for the nighttime and the darkness.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a very religious person. He tries to walk a holy pathway aligned with God. He finds himself attracted to Jesus' ministries, like a moth to a streetlight. He wants to meet Jesus, but he wants to hide his interest. So he visits Jesus under the cover of darkness. In the middle of the night, he comes face to face with the light of the world, and he's simply blinded.

Jesus engages Nicodemus in a theological discussion. First, he tells him that he needs to be born anew. Nicodemus just can't understand this.

We tune in today when Jesus mentions an instance that happened to the Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness. The people began to complain for the umpteenth time. They wish they'd never left Egypt. God punishes their lack of faith by sending poisonous snakes into their camp.

When they repent, God instructs Moses to make an image of a serpent out of bronze and lift it high on a pole for all to see. Whenever anyone was bitten by a snake, they'd look at the bronze serpent and be healed.

So the means of their salvation looks like the means of their judgment. God works restoration and healing through an object that looks like the very thing that poisoned them.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that God is about to do something very similar. God is going to transform a moment of judgment into one of salvation. The cross, a vehicle of judgment and condemnation, will become the means by which God brings salvation to the world. Jesus will be lifted up on his cross and become the object of our salvation.

God will turn it upside-down. An action that was meant to condemn will be used to save. God's intention is to save, not to condemn. That's because the heart of God, what is the motivating engine behind all that God does, is love. God loves, and love wants to save. Love doesn't wish the worst for the beloved. Love wants the best. Love desires blessing, not curse.

And so God is about to take this means of scorn and condemnation, and transform it into the vehicle for the salvation of the world. Jesus will be lifted up on his cross, just as the bronze serpent was years ago. And all who look up and gaze at him will be redeemed. Death will be turned into life. Sorrow will change into joy.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night. Under the cover of darkness, he comes to see the Light of the World. What he beholds is too blinding for his nocturnal eyes.

We're very much like Nicodemus, you and I. We spend our whole lives trying to come into the light, seeking the light. We try to make sense of the fullness of Jesus' healing light, but the brilliance of his salvation is too much for us to fully comprehend. We're unable to grasp the true depth and breadth of Christ's healing light.

Like Nicodemus, in this life we will remain somewhere between the darkness of night and the graying of dawn. For now, we only capable of seeing dimly.

But when we depart this life, then we shall step into the dawning of Christ's great light. It will be the light that emanated from Christ's tomb on that first Easter, the light no darkness can overcome. And then we shall, at last, see face to face. We'll know in full, just as we have been fully known by the divine.

But now, for we who dwell in deep darkness, this light of love is something that we can't fully comprehend. Our brother, Nicodemus, came at night, and when he left it was still night. So long as we're in this world, the same is true for us.

But what we have now is the sign that's been given to us. We look up and see Jesus lifted on the cross. This is the sign of healing given to us. It's the sign – not of condemnation – but of salvation. We gaze upon this sign of grace given: our savior, lifted high above us. Through this sign we see the full length and breadth and depth of the divine love that embraces our world. Do we understand it? No, not fully, not even half of it. But we lift our eyes, and we behold.

Nicodemus was an incredibly good man. He was honest to the core. As I said, he was a Pharisee. Pharisees were extremely serious about keeping the rules and he was very, very good. Now understand I'm not talking about just keeping the Ten Commandments. No, the Pharisees didn't worry about keeping them because over the years they also added another 633 rules to enable them to keep those Ten Commandments. You see, the Pharisees were serious about their goodness.

For example: they wanted to know how far one could walk on the Sabbath without breaking the Sabbath. How far could one walk before it was considered work? What could you carry without it being considered work? They arrived at this answer: "You could walk 2000 yards but not one step more. That would be

considered work. You could not lift a pot nor light a fire on the Sabbath, so food would have to be prepared the day before and eaten cold. Yet Jesus reminded them that they broke their own rules and could save a donkey if it fell into a well on the Sabbath.

Nicodemus was doing his level best to keep the rules as a Pharisee. He was depending on his goodness, his Jewish genetics, his blood connection to Abraham to earn God's favor and a place in heaven.

He was doing a pretty good job. He had religious credentials. He worked for the Jewish high council; He spoke the correct religious language. 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, but he could not see the "light" right in front of him, but a flicker of light brought him to Jesus one night.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night... He came at night because he did not want his brother Pharisees to know his anxiety, his insecurity. Nicodemus knew his broken rules could not be forgotten.

This is basically the conversation: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. I have kept all of the rules and forms and rituals of our faith. Jesus interrupts and turns to Nicodemus: "You must be born again." Well, what does that really mean?

Jesus: "What I'm talking about is that you can not rely on your family history, your goodness, your Jewishness to open the doors to heaven. I'm the replacement. In the future, heaven's doors are opened by the Spirit giving faith in me as the Savior."

You must be born from above or "Born Again." This is a term not used by Lutherans but it is heard a lot. So what does it mean? For some Christian denominations the words "Born again" means that there was a moment in time in which, like Nicodemus, you were blind to the light and truth of Jesus as your Savior, and then there was an event or emotional moment when you made a decision that Jesus was the answer and the darkness in your life was shattered.

As a Lutheran I would answer: "Who enabled you to make that decision? The answer is simple. The Holy Spirit. "I believe that I can not by my own reason or

strength believe....but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel..."

What "born again" means is that either in your baptism or through some other experience, the Holy Spirit enables you to believe that Jesus is your personal Savior, that His grace, His forgiveness, His promise of eternal life, is a gift.

As the conversation comes to a conclusion Jesus states what might be the most important verse in the New Testament. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert" and all who looked at it were healed from the deadly poisonous bites that brought death. So also, "when I, the Son of Man is lifted up on a cross, anyone who believes in me will have eternal life." "Indeed God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." In some ways, verse 17 suffers from understandable neglect, coming as it does on the heels of what Martin Luther called "the heart of the Bible" and "the gospel in miniature, the gospel in a nutshell."

Many people still miss the Savior's point. People get so wrapped up in the words "being born again," being born from above that they get confused as did Nicodemus. Unfortunately many people today have the same mindset as Nicodemus. People think that without any outside assistance, if we are "good enough" God will say: "Wow! You really do deserve my grace. You really are a good person. I am so overwhelmed by the way you've lived your life, I'm going to invite you into heaven."

Because Jesus loves you, He endured, He suffered, He sacrificed, and He died. Because He loved you, He gave Himself over to the whip, the thorns, the blows, the nails, and the cross. Because Jesus loved you, He gave Himself as the ransom that would give forgiveness and salvation to all who believe on Him. And with His resurrection from the dead, we know God's gift has been given, His love is revealed and all who believe on the Christ as their suffering substitute and victorious Redeemer have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."

AMEN!!

“WAS SHE A DISTURBED WOMAN?”

Message for the Third Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 8, 2026

EXODUS 17: 1-7 ** ROMANS 5: 1-11 ** JOHN 4: 5-42

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD THE FATHER AND OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

How many of you here today would like to return to the “good ole days?” As humans, whether we lived there or not, we sometimes look backward and want to return to those ‘good ole days’ because, well, they look good. They weren’t. Well, OK, maybe they were to some degree, but probably not a whole lot better than today. Different maybe. Sometimes we magnify the discrepancy between then and now by the way we tend to forget the ‘bad times’ and just focus on the good memories.

Chapter 4 of John’s Gospel opens with these words: “Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John,’ although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized, he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.’ He had to go through Samaria. Remember, Jesus didn’t have access to a private jet; he wasn’t taking an Amtrak train or a chauffeur driven limo, he was on foot. He was walking and his journey involved a little town called Sychar which is where our text picks up today. I checked; it’s about 30 miles from Judea to Samaria. Jesus is tired. And thirsty. Could you walk 30 miles on a hot summer day, dusty, dirty, gravelly road but remember again, he had to go through Samaria? Jesus and his disciples traveled through Samaria, an area filled with national and racial conflict. Jesus couldn’t avoid this leg of the trip; it wasn’t an accident. Jesus had an appointment there that he was going to keep. That appointment had been made centuries before in the council halls of God.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but this is a lengthy Gospel Lesson! I’ll have to be brief as I give you some of the background information. Following John’s “paradigm of personal interaction” we have another “one on one” situation. Most of the Gospel Lesson for today is just about Jesus’ and a Samaritan woman. You

may recall how that is one of the things that makes John's Gospel a little different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Larger sections of John are dedicated to Jesus' interaction with individuals. Think of how John 3 records the familiar one on one encounter between Jesus and Jewish leader named Nicodemus. John 4 has the Samaritan woman introduced in our Gospel reading this morning. It also has the account of one "royal official" who came to Jesus asking him to heal his son. John 5 tells us about a crippled man Jesus healed at the pool of water called Bethesda. All of John 9 is the account of Jesus healing one particular blind man. John 11 tells us about Jesus' conversations with Martha and Mary and then his raising of Lazarus from the dead. And then five chapters of John's Gospel records Jesus' conversation with just his disciples on Maundy Thursday.

The writer of John paints a stark contrast between the Jewish leader, Nicodemus in chapter three, whom we heard about last Sunday, and the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter four today. The Pharisee and religious leader has a name; the woman is unnamed. The man was a Jew and the woman a Samaritan. Nicodemus approaches Jesus in the middle of the night; the woman encounters Jesus in broad daylight at noon. Nicodemus is confused; the woman is insightful. Nicodemus returns to his home, still in the dark, still not convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. The woman goes and tells the people of her village that she has found the Savior of the world. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

As I said earlier, Jesus was thirsty. He's just walked 30 miles over a dusty, rocky road and he's not only thirsty, he's tired. Walking was Jesus' only way of going from point A to point B, until Palm Sunday and that too is another story. He didn't have access to any other means of transportation on this day.

We who live in Ohio or Kentucky or even West Virginia know what thirst is like, especially if we've been mowing our lawn or weeding the flower bed, fixing the roof, the list goes on. We get thirsty but we also know how delightful it is to drink a cold glass of water. When we were thirsty, we might have recalled seeing people in undeveloped countries drinking water that looked horribly dirty. At the time we told ourselves that we would never drink water like that. Look how long the folks in Wayne WV went without being able to drink water from the tap, let alone wash in it or cook with it. As I recall, even when they were thirsty and without water, the thought never crossed their minds to drink that water!

The woman who met Jesus needed to come to the well to fetch water regularly. Her timing was unusual to say the least. Women often drew their water in the cool of the day, but this woman was there at noon, wanting to avoid the crowds and the

shame that her sin had brought upon her. Jews didn't typically interact with Samaritans, let alone Samaritan women and Jesus spoke to her with one simple request, 'Give me a drink.' In just that moment, Jesus was sweeping away many prejudices that people have, like race or even gender. She's a bit surprised, wondering why a Jew would even speak to her, a Samaritan. Jesus avoids the question to get at her much deeper need: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again." The Samaritan woman still thinks he's offering physical water, so he says, "Go call your husband, and come here." She's still thinking about physical water. After that brief exchange, Jesus offered her living water. Living water, ooh, are there bugs in it? You don't have a bucket; the well is deep, how do you get that living water. Jesus offered her himself. "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

We are a thirsty people—not only physically but also spiritually. Saint Augustine is credited with saying, "You have created us for yourself, and our heart is not quiet until it rests in you." We attempt to quench our thirst by filling our hearts with the dirty water of this world—power, prestige, comfort and security. Jesus offers us himself—living water—but we do not discipline ourselves to take the time to drink the water Jesus offers so that we will never be thirsty again.

Then Jesus gets personal. I said earlier that men weren't supposed to talk with women let alone Samaritan women. Even the disciples were surprised when they returned from their little shopping trip and found Jesus talking with a woman. 'Go call your husband.' In His omniscience, his all-knowing way, Jesus' comments to the woman about her not having a husband; she's had five of them! And the guy you're with now, do you even know his name, is not your husband! It's like a thousand search lights had been turned on in her heart, and every dirty secret in her life leaked into the glare. How would you react if you're face to face with Jesus himself and he tells you something about your past, or even your present. I know all about that or all about her; things your wife doesn't know. Let me talk to her. No wait, she's not your wife, just some woman you moved in with.

This knowledge of Jesus causes her to realize that Jesus must be a prophet. Jesus showed His knowledge of the woman's past and revealed his identity as the Messiah, since only God could know the things He shared with her. She sets her water jug down and ran into town carrying a very simple message. "Come see a

man who told me all that I ever did; can this be the Christ? Talk about a powerful appeal. ‘Many Samaritans, our text says, from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.’ She didn’t have much theology to tell them and she wasn’t trained in any theology subjects. She didn’t know what to say. All she said was, “Come and see Jesus and He can change your life like he’s changed mine.”

Have you met Jesus like that?

The woman tells the people what has happened to her and invites them to come and see Jesus. The people follow her back to Jesus. Jesus stays with the people for a couple of days. When he leaves the people comment that at first they believed because of what the woman said. Now, however, they say that they believe because they have seen and heard Jesus.

I just want to take a brief detour to address a couple of issues and then we’ll wrap up. Fetching water has traditionally been women’s work, and it’s very difficult. All of a household’s water needs – for drinking and cooking and cleaning – need to be hauled and carried from a well. Sometimes a woman will have to walk a very long distance to the water source. They typically carry it on their heads. So when the Samaritan woman hears about this living water, one that satisfies, she’s all ears. “Give me some of this water.”

Fetching water is an endless task. Thirst and going to the well reflect our human condition. We can thirst after so many things. But do these cravings ever satisfy? Or do they only leave us wanting for more? And although they never do fully satisfy, we keep coming back to the same old well.

The conversation between Jesus and the woman continues. Jesus reveals very personal aspects of the woman’s life. For whatever reason, she has been married five times. He doesn’t say this accusingly; He just states it as a matter of fact.

Women in Jesus’ day were extremely vulnerable. Their lives depended on being connected to a man, either a father, a brother or a husband. A husband could divorce his wife over very trivial reasons – for instance, he doesn’t like her cooking.

But despite that, if a woman was repeatedly divorced, she was the one to receive a negative stigma. That’s what had happened to this Samaritan woman. She lived every day of her life in troubled waters. She creeps around the margins of society. She’s done her best to become as transparent as water, to be invisible.

But now, in Jesus, she's met someone who truly sees her. He knows everything about her but he still treats her with respect and full acceptance.

And this is exactly how Jesus regards you. See yourself standing by that well instead of this woman. Jesus knows you to your core. He knows every single aspect of your being – your history, your thoughts and fears, your errors and your yearnings. And he still fully accepts you.

This was the living water which the woman most needed. In her lonely existence, someone finally saw her fully and accepted her. This is the living water for us, too. It's the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord. It satisfies our deepest thirst in a way that nothing else can.

This discussion between Jesus and the woman is so overwhelming and intimate that she needs to back off a bit. She's in uncharted waters, so she changes the subject. She talks about the differences between Jews and Samaritans and where the correct place for worship is.

Today's reading from John 4 uses something from everyday life that is intended to give us a powerful connection to spiritual truth. It's supposed to touch our head and our heart and impact our emotions. But I fear that it is lost on us. What am I talking about? It's just plain water. Well, I guess drinking water specifically.

Here is what I mean. In the account of Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, water is a central theme. And it's important for us to know that in the setting of our Gospel Lesson it took effort to get water. It wasn't always clean. Water was such a precious commodity that if a person owned a water well, he was richer than a person who owned an oil well. And it wasn't uncommon for people to get sick and even die because of not having safe water to drink. Although there are perhaps many things that we take for granted in our modern world I think one of the biggest items is water that is safe to drink, easily accessible, and relatively inexpensive. A lot of us won't even touch tap water but prefer to buy bottled water.

Folks, we are the body of Christ. Don't forget that. We are Christ's hands, feet, eyes, mouth here on earth. How do we look compared to the compassionate and loving head that is Christ? Are we welcoming and loving to all people? Regardless of where they come from. Or what they look like. How they talk or what language

they speak. How educated they are or how much money they have. Are we compassionate to all?

The Samaritan woman is one of the first evangelists in the Bible. She can be a model for how we share God's love and grace with the people around us. We invite our family, friends, neighbors and co-workers to "come and see." Jesus will meet them where they are and offer them living water as he has us. One sip and they will realize, also, that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

We are called to be the body of Christ. We are meant to meet the compassion and love Christ has shown. May God be with us, His church on earth as we do all we can to match the compassion Christ has shown this world! Together we come and see—not once but daily. We live in God's grace and love and drink of God's bottomless well of living water.

Amen!!

“BELIEVING IS SEEING”

Message for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 15, 2026

1 SAMUEL 16: 1-13 ** EPHESIANS 5: 8-14 ** JOHN 9: 1-41

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF EACH HEART BE ACCEPTABLE IN THY SIGHT O LORD OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Maybe it goes without saying, but this is another lengthy Gospel Lesson! I'll try to be brief as I give you some background information. Following John's "model of personal interaction" we have another "one on one" situation. The Gospel Lesson for last Sunday was about Jesus and a Samaritan woman. You may recall how that is one of the things that makes John's Gospel a little different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Larger sections of John are dedicated to Jesus' interaction with individuals. As an example of what I'm talking about, John 3 records the familiar one on one encounter between Jesus and Jewish leader named Nicodemus. John 4 has the Samaritan woman, no name given, introduced in our Gospel reading last Sunday; married 5 times and living with a sixth, and even more, Jesus knew everything about her! It also has the account of one "royal official" who came to Jesus asking him to heal his son. John 5 tells us about a crippled man Jesus healed at the pool of water called Bethesda. All of John 9, our Gospel lesson today, is the account of Jesus healing one particular blind man not named in today's Gospel. John 11 tells us about Jesus' conversations with Martha and Mary and then his raising of Lazarus from the dead. And then five chapters of John's Gospel records Jesus' conversation with just his disciples on Maundy Thursday. Do you think that story was important to John? Five chapters!

John is a superb storyteller with a gift for character development, the character development not only of those in the story, but also of the reader; that would be you and me. Today's story invites us to see the man born blind as the icon or mirror of all we are called to be as Christians. His miracle is our miracle. What makes the story so exciting is that as the man makes each choice, he is 'seeing' himself, revealing God's image within him. Step by step, the image emerges as the

man chooses a new way of being in the world. The whole purpose of the miracle is not to give him the ability to distinguish red from green, but to give him the ability to distinguish truth from illusion.

However, the story of Jesus mixing mud with spit and giving sight to a man in John 9 is not really about the blind man. It's more about the Pharisees who were spiritually blind to God, to the people in their world, and finally (and this is the most condemning of all) to their own sin. The irony is that the blind man saw what the Pharisees refused to see.

This week we will learn how this blind man came to see, not just with his eyes but with his heart; how it's not "How" and "When" that matters spiritually but "Who" and "Why."

And the critical factor to your own spiritual life is linked to how you must be willing to see yourself honestly.

Getting these lessons down in your personal life will change how you live and how you see others, including those whom God has called to guide and teach His people.

The blind man came to see – with his heart as well as his eyes.

He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

Look at the Pharisees: This story is more about the Pharisees than it is about the blind man.

There is a kind of irony involved in this event because as you read the story it's obvious that the blind man had better vision than the Pharisees with their 20/20 religious vision and spiritual training.

The final observation of the whole narrative is that these self appointed spiritual shepherds of Israel are really just hypocritical hirelings.

Here are the Pharisees – separated from the world and devoted to God – yet they were blind as bats to spiritual truth. We've heard a lot about the Pharisees lately. What exactly is a Pharisee? The origin of the name “Pharisee” has been debated,

but most scholars agree that it derives from the Hebrew root meaning “to separate.” This makes sense, because the Pharisees were separatists.

One such group of Pharisees were known as the "bruised and bleeding" Pharisees. This was because in their attempt to avoid lust, they would walk about with their eyes covered, and as a result, fall into holes or walk into walls. Their bruises became their proof of spirituality and commitment to God.

The Pharisees were those people who set themselves up as the religious leaders of the people while being separate from them and better than them.

Now look at the blind man: Here is a man – blind from birth till this very moment – yet he came to see clearly. Here was a man who bore a burden that was clearly unfair. It wasn't fair and it wasn't easy. The whole of his community looked down at him and assumed that either he or his parents did something that made this calamity happen to him. ‘Rabbi, who sinned; this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’

Sound familiar? Do you know anyone who has been dealt a tough hand in life? Maybe they have a birthmark that covers half their face, ears that stick out like cup handles, or a body that attracts calories like a magnet picks up metal filings. Maybe it's a little less visible – a father who didn't love them; a mother who was too busy to care for them; a school full of children who taunted them.

Yet when Jesus came along, he put mud and spit in his eyes (and the man let him) and sent him to the pool of Siloam to wash them out. This isn't quite as yucky as we think of it – at least the spit part wasn't. This was before germs were discovered and the people of that culture believed that spit had medicinal and cleansing value – just like my mom did back in the good old days when she'd spit on a hanky at the restaurant to clean the ketchup or mustard off my face or my brothers/sisters. Now we use sanitary wipes.

When he washed his eyes out – he could see – for the first time in his entire life he understood the color red and he embraced the clouds in the sky.

When Jesus touches your life like that – it changes you forever. At least it did this man because he saw Jesus not only with his eyes but with a grateful heart.

Jesus asks just two things of every person he meets – first: trust him even when you don't understand; second, tell others what he did for you when you trusted

him.

The blind man saw what the Pharisees wouldn't see.

It's not "How" & "When". It's "Who" & "Why."

Verse 15: Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed and now I see.'

Verse 16: Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.'

Again, it's not "how" that matters!

The Pharisees asked HOW this man was healed 4 times. But how is not the point. It's not about mud and spit – not the point at all.

Jesus used several "unconventional" methods to bring healing: He touched a leper; He spoke a word while miles away from a sick person; He made a mudpack by spitting upon the clay soil. Placing it upon a man's eyes, he told him to go and wash it off; He forgave a man's sins to bring healing; He took a dead girl by the hand and raised her from the dead; He stood in front of the tomb of Lazarus and called loudly for the dead to come out; He put his fingers in a deaf man's ears, He spit & touched his tongue; He spit on a blind man's eyes after leading him out of town, not our story today; Jesus stood over Peter's mother-in-law and rebuked the raging fever. It's not How – it is WHO!

Pharisees confused how with who. They also confused when with why. The fact that Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath so enraged them they couldn't see the good that had been done.

Jesus was about ministering to people and caring for them.

Pharisees were so busy being committed religiously that they would not know themselves honestly.

We need to see both the sin and the solution.

Jesus said, "... I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him

heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’

How can I say this? In the one profound word of the wise Homer Simpson – duh! Yeah! You are totally blind!

They would not see their own sin and they could not comprehend that Jesus was the solution.

Yet these men were the shepherds of Israel. They were self-appointed, self absorbed, and self-righteous – get the point – it was about “self.”

Jesus said, “... I came so that the blind would see and so that those who see will become blind.”

It comes down to a simple question: Are you like the blind man or are you like the Pharisees? Do you see with your heart or are you blinded by your pride? Pride is a terrible thing.

Follow Jesus – the religious rules and traditions will take care of themselves. Focus on people and be filled with compassion for them.

Surely we are not blind, are we? Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘we see,’ your sin remains.

There is little doubt to the fact that every person here has most likely heard the old adage, “Seeing is believing.” In a world filled with insatiable claims it has become commonplace for a person to respond, “I won’t believe it, until I see it.” The problem with this old adage, “Seeing is believing,” is simply that it doesn’t always hold true.

There was a group of people we find in the Scriptures with a similar problem. The Pharisees were eyewitnesses to many of the miracles that Jesus performed, but even though they saw, they did not believe.

In our text today, we are presented with a classic case of these Pharisees seeing the evidence, but refusing to believe the truth. It is because of this very reason that Jesus gives us an important principle found in verse 39. “Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.’

The blind man in our text believed the word about Jesus. There is a good possibility that the man had heard others speaking about Jesus.

Maybe you believe the word about Jesus today. You know there is something special about Him. You may not know everything about Him but you believe some things you have heard about Jesus.

This man believed something else about Jesus. He believed the work of Jesus. Notice in verse 25. “He answered and said, whether he is a sinner or not, I do not know: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.” Although the man didn’t have a complete knowledge about Jesus, he believed that Jesus made a difference.

Listen! There is one thing, one principle truth that is found here. To this man Jesus made a difference. It still holds true today. Today, Jesus still makes a difference. To blinded eyes, Jesus still makes a difference. To broken homes, Jesus still makes a difference. To shattered dreams, Jesus still makes a difference. To the one in what may be a hopeless situation, just as with this man in our text, Jesus still makes a difference.

When Jesus asked the question, “Do you believe in the Son of God?,” He was already aware of this man’s measure of faith. Faith is progressive. Jesus knew the man believed the word about Him. Jesus knew that this man believed He makes a difference.

The true light that enlightens us has come into the world. He has come to us in our blindness and covered our sightless days with clay. If we go to the pool to wash, it is not only so that we can see the light, but so that we can be light in the world. God’s clarity will shine through us because there will no longer be anything to disguise it. This Lenten season may you and I see clearly and choose wisely.

Amen.

“UNWRAPPING THE GOOD NEWS”

Message for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 22, 2026

EZEKIEL 37: 1-14 ** ROMANS 8: 6-11 ** JOHN 11: 1-45

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

During these Sundays in Lent, we have spent time looking at some of the most memorable events and characters of the Bible. We have looked at Nicodemus, the woman of Samaria, and the man born blind. This week we look at one of the most familiar stories of the entire Bible, the story of the raising of Lazarus. Almost anyone who is only faintly acquainted with the Bible has heard of how Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave.

We human beings are a diverse group. We have very few things universally in common. Ben Franklin once commented that the only two things that are certain are death and taxes, however, there are a few people who are very adept at avoiding taxes. There was a man in Ironton who eventually got arrested and had all his property seized by the IRS and sold to pay taxes which, according to him, and his reason for not paying taxes, was that the government said he should pay taxes, not must pay taxes so that was his loophole. Should versus must. This is tax season and because of those certain few who don't pay them, we can only assume that the one thing that is universal or certain among people is death.

Because of its common interest, many people have made various observations concerning death:

A famous writer, W. Somerset Maugham, said, “Death is a very dull, dreary affair, and my advice to you is to have nothing whatever to do with it.”

George Burns said, “I don't believe in dying. It's been done. I'm working on a new exit. Besides, I can't die now—I'm booked.”

Another comedian, Woody Allen, said, “It’s not that I’m afraid to die; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

Mark Twain said, “Before we were born, we knew nothing of it, and after we’re gone, we will know no more.”

Many people are willing to wax eloquent on the subject of death, but it is all from ignorance. The passage of Scripture that is the Gospel for today gives us a clearer understanding of death and life, because it comes from a divine perspective.

Death is the greatest challenge to our faith. The early Christians struggled with death, because they thought that Jesus would return before death would overtake them. John has recorded this incident (he is the only gospel writer who does) in part to quiet the fears of the early Christians and help them deal with death.

Martha is an example of all those Christians who believe all the right things and have all of the right answers. Martha and the Christians like her are stopped dead in their tracks when they face the reality of death. It is one thing to know that one should believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and another thing to rest and place one’s faith in that truth.

Mary represents the feel good Christians; those who get an emotional high by loving Jesus. It is a positive experience being a Christian until they experience the reality of death. Suddenly, they do not feel good any more and wonder what happened to their faith. It is one thing to love Jesus and another thing to rest and to place one’s faith in the truth that he is the resurrection and the life.

Jesus invites both Mary and Martha to put away their right answers and good feelings and to trust him—believe that he breathed the breathe of life into the situation.

When we talk about death, we often focus on physical death. We die, though, in many different ways.

We die when we receive a pink slip and are asked to look for another job. Sometimes we not only die to the job, but also to the dreams and the hopes that it held for us.

We die when we move to another town, state, or country. We die to old habits, old comforts, and long relationships.

We die as we age to youth's energy and dreams, to muscles that don't ache, and a heart that is strong and healthy.

As Christian disciples, we die to our old life and we turn to the new, abundant life that God invites us to live.

Death is never easy, because we have to trust that there is new life on the other side of death. We place our faith in the hope that Jesus truly is the resurrection and the life and that he will bring new life into our situation. It is interesting to note that Jesus never prevents someone from dying. The only way to experience new life is to experience death.

Often we are so afraid to die that we allow our fear to control our lives. One person has observed, "Some people are so afraid to die that they never begin to live." Along this line, another person stated, "Death is more universal than life; everyone dies but not everyone lives.

Lazarus is called from the dead and out of the tomb by Jesus. He hops out bound by grave clothes. Jesus commands that he be unbound and freed. Lazarus represents Christians who are bound up in their fear of death and change.

Placing our trust in Jesus, no matter what happens, frees us for life and victory over death. Jesus said that he is the resurrection and the life. Every day we live in the reality of this truth. When we confront death in its many shapes and forms, we will be victorious and we will experience new life because of what Jesus has done on the cross.

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." And we hear from someone whose business it was to do just that, unbind him.

I was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

My wife was good friends with both Martha and Mary and so when their brother Lazarus died she wanted to go out to the mourning site. We couldn't go on the first two days because of the work in the field but we went for the third and fourth days.

And really my wife was doing most of the weeping and wailing – you know how it is with women. I just sort of stood off to the side talking with a few of the other guys or helping out if the servants needed help lifting a heavy pot – or whatever. You know, just sort of observing and overseeing the whole thing.

Well, when Jesus showed up that's when things started to get really interesting. I knew it would – the instant I saw him.

He had been the focus of attention all around the area. Apparently he had performed a lot of miracles. I heard that he fed a whole crowd with just a few pieces of bread. And there are rumors that he turned some water into wine up in Cana.

I didn't know if that was true but that's what people were saying. And in general he seemed to stir things up wherever he went. People were either really against him or they were really for him. Some were even saying that he was the Messiah.

So when he shows up at the mourning with his entourage of disciples, a motley crew if you ask me, I kept an eye on him – as much out of curiosity as anything.

Anyway, he starts walking over toward the tomb – you know what I'm talking about – those small caves hewn from the sides of the hill. After people had died, they'd be wrapped in strips of cloth and covered with scented spices – and left on a shelf in the tomb to decay.

Then a big rock would be rolled over the entrance – and that's how things would be – for about a year. At that point the tomb would be reopened and the bones would be transferred to a burial box.

Anyway, when Jesus showed up it was only the fourth day – right at the point where the body was starting to decompose. And Jesus walks up to the tomb and tells the servants to move the stone which covered the door.

Martha, quite a little beside herself, weary from all of the wailing, looked right at Jesus and told him – “Lord, he's been in there for four days! If we open that door, it's going to stink something terrible.”

Jesus's response was something about the glory of God. After which the servants walked over and moved the stone. Jesus then positioned himself in front of the tomb – looked up into heaven, raised his hands, and started to pray – "Father,

thank you for hearing me. You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so they will believe you sent me."

And all the time I'm thinking – "Okay – what's that about."

But then, without even saying Amen – he raises his voice even more and starts to shout into the tomb – "Lazarus, come out." – as though by his very words he could call life into existence.

There was this long horribly uncomfortable pause – a silence. The birds stopped singing and the breeze ceased. I could smell that horrid scent of death rushing from the open cave door. But no one said a thing. No one whispered. The only sound was that of everyone holding their breath.

After what seemed like an eternity but only a few seconds passed, there was a small noise coming from the tomb – as though someone had tripped and picked himself up. And suddenly but slowly a shoulder emerged in the doorway and then a wrapped head – and a full mummy.

If I wasn't so shocked, I would have run.

You couldn't see his face because it was wrapped up and the hands and the legs were bound together. And the body shuffled and hopped itself along for two or three feet.

Everyone froze. There was a collective gasp.

And it was at that point that I became the wrong person at the wrong time – for Jesus turned to me and one of the servants I'd been talking to and said – "Don't just stand there; unwrap him and let him go!"

Yeah, right, the thing that went through my mind was – YOU WANT ME TO GO UNWRAP SOME ZOMBIE! No way was I going to go near it -- no way -- no way - no way!

I'm sure Jesus sensed our hesitancy. And when he flashed that reassuring smile, like guys I got this, we both melted and started to walk slowly toward the standing body.

I reached up and gingerly started to unwrapped the cloth around its head – not too complicated but scary. What would be under there as it came off? An extreme make-over. And we both breathed a little easier when we saw the fresh pinkish skin on his forehead.

We looked into his eyes and they were not the eyes of a dead man.

And when the cloth came off his nose, we could hear breathing and there was this indescribable grin on his face as we unwrapped his jaw – a look of someone relieved of a great burden and at the same time totally satisfied after a great meal.

His arms and legs started to move so we hurried to unwrap the rest of his body. Piles and piles of scented spices dropped to the ground with every layer unwrapped.

The smell was sweat – and the scene of death which was so strong but a few minutes before was totally overwhelmed by the smell of life.

Someone took off his cloak and threw it over Lazarus so that he had at least some decent body covering – and to protect all of that fresh skin from the sun.

Martha lost control at that point and threw her arms around Jesus weeping with joy.

Mary ran over to hug her brother – followed by about 300 other people. For all of the commotion had gathered a crowd.

The mourners quit mourning and broke into song. Lines of people started to dance. It was all somewhat euphoric – in a once-in-a-lifetime-kind-of-way. To go from the depths of despair to the height of life in a few short minutes – is enough to change your life forever.

And I'll tell you my life was changed – in lots of ways.

Of course, Lazarus who had been but an acquaintance became one of my best friends. You don't go through an ordeal like that without striking some new bonds.

My wife and I were actually the ones who hid Lazarus for a few weeks when the chief priests were plotting to kill him. They had become so concerned about such a

public act on the part of Jesus that they thought by permanently removing Lazarus from the scene, it would make the crowd less enthusiastic for Jesus!

So we hosted Lazarus in our barn for a week or two – but that’s another story.

The thing that changed the most, though, was how I connected with Jesus.

Now, it’s not like he became my best chum – at least not in the sense that he would come to our house for dinner everyday. But after that, he knew me and I knew him. And I knew what it meant to believe.

You don’t see a man raised from the dead and not believe. Well, I suppose you could. I’m sure some did. But I was there and I saw, and it was like a lamp was lit when Lazarus left the tomb.

All of those rumors about Jesus became facts. I realized that if he could call someone from the tomb that it wasn’t really a big deal to feed a crowd from a boy’s lunch or to turn water into wine. All of those things that he had been saying about himself – being living water – being light – being the bread of life... When I first heard them, it sounded like the man had an ego – with a big E. But when I saw that he was really the Messiah – the Son of God – the Master over death – all of those grandiose claims seemed to be understatement. Of course he is all those things – he could even raise the dead!

I was a part of the “them” crowd and I’m here to tell you that death can be unwrapped – and the Master over life and death is about the business of setting people free from their grave clothes.

Let that reality change how you look at life – and indeed your very lives just like it has mine.

Jesus took his time to get to Lazarus’ tomb for one reason, the reason he stated at the beginning of this story: “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” It may make us anxious, but it is God’s power that saves us, in God’s own time.

Amen!!