

Sermon, March 22, 2009
4th Sunday in Lent

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St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church
Marion, MA

Sermon - Saved by Grace

Our lessons today, the fourth Sunday in Lent speak of momentous themes: life, death; condemnation and salvation; of human sin and God's mercy

"It is by grace that you have been saved..."

"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."

Our canticles echo these themes: "Jesus, bearer of our sins, redeemer of the world, have mercy upon us." Our eucharistic liturgy underscores all these points every week, and we give our voices, and I trust we give our hearts as well, to these central doctrines of the Christian faith. And if each of our spiritual biographies were opened to one another, I suspect that we would see that we don't just give a kind of conditioned intellectual assent to the concept that God saves us... We acknowledge that reality as the central power at work within us, buoying our hopes, freeing us from our past regrets, inspiring us to just and loving acts, connecting us with the living God.

But even given all of that, I have noticed, as a lifelong Episcopalian, that there is a deep, wide, pervasive awkwardness among us ever to speak of these things outside of the music, poetry, and ceremony of our Sunday morning liturgy. We have just sung aloud these words: "Not to oppress, but summon all their truest life to find, in love God sent his son to save, not to condemn mankind." You did a creditable job singing it, but which of us will chat about it over coffee in the parish hall? I have to guess at the reasons for this awkwardness.

One might be that we have all heard what we might call cheap, manipulative appeals on the radio, on television, or from well-intentioned but pretty obnoxious folks who use these words to try to get us right with God. But something about

the presentation—the rural southern accent; the appeal to fear; the sloppy grammar; the lack of sophisticated, nuanced thought.... Something in there—makes us recoil from using these terms when we speak of our own faith together. We don't want to be obnoxious. We don't want others to think ill of us.

Another speculation is that the categories themselves are troublesome. Who wants to consider the possibility of eternal alienation from God? Of a final judgment day in God's presence when our truest nature and destiny are revealed? Who wants to consider even the theoretical possibility that it is possible for us to miss the good thing that God is doing for us and among us? I think that one reason we don't speak of these things is that ***we simply prefer to believe*** that God manages to get all of us safely home and into His loving presence. Call it hopeful agnosticism, or wishful thinking. Whatever Jesus meant when he spoke about separating the sheep and the goats, or about perishing apart from faith in God, those were probably points where the disciples got it wrong when they wrote down the stories. So we shy from thoughts that are disagreeable to us, and hold onto thoughts that bring us some sense of security.

Whatever the motives for our awkwardness on these subjects, whatever differences of conviction there may be among us in this area, I know this: some of us need a radical conversion from flesh to spirit, from self-worship to the worship of God, from sin to righteousness, from death to life. I think of John Newton, the slave trader turned Anglican priest who wrote the memorable lines in the hymn, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me... I once was lost, but now am found..."

I think of the Apostle Paul, who speaks of himself as one who persecuted the Lord Jesus, who hounded his disciples, who stood by and assented to the stoning of Saint Stephen, and who underwent the most dramatic sort of transformation of the soul. He came to be the primary spokesman for the truth of Jesus to the non-Jewish world, spending his life in missionary Servanthood, teaching and preaching: "I have been crucified with Christ; It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

I think of your rector, who needed a radical re-orientation of life's priorities, who needed to be released from past hurts, false steps, disbelief, and certifiably bad choices. I know that I needed to have the clear assurance that I was not on a

broad and easy way to destruction, but was on a straight and narrow way that leads surely to everlasting life.

Thank God, some of us, perhaps most of us, have not needed that dramatic conversion experience to know God, to grow in the knowledge and service of God, and to be able to speak of Christ's place in our lives. Something of Christ's winsome truth, love, and grace was implanted early in our lives through faithful parents, through attentive, careful guidance by Sunday School teachers, kind and insightful ministers, and joyful choir directors. That good news has flourished gradually, over the years, and no spiritual earthquakes of misplaced trust, whirlwinds in world-view, or floods of grateful tears have been required.

If you are among that number, I celebrate with you, and praise God for the grace, love and mercy that have been at work within you.

But I ask a favor of you as well. Allow for the joyful possibility that there are, in the Episcopal Church, among us at St. Gabriel's, and throughout Christendom—those like John Newton, like Paul—who sing the old verse of the old hymn: "Perverse and foolish oft I strayed, but yet, in love he sought me, and on his shoulder, gently laid, and home, rejoicing brought me."

Like the lost sheep in every age who know what it is to be carried back to the flock, we know that faith in Christ has changed our lives eternally for the better. We know that we have been saved—rescued, made new, turned-around, given a new nature and a new purpose—because of that ancient story's power. And most of all, we know that we are living better than we previously knew that we could because someone loved us enough to guide us to this savior of the world.

Let's all be sure that those who need to hear that such a transformation is possible hear a clear, loving, inviting and inspired version from us, so that they don't miss it.

Lord, help us to find a true, winsome voice to share with any who need to know how wonderfully, thoroughly you search us out, hold us in love, fix us and save us.