

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Second Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2021

Psalm 22:22-31 (ESV):

22 I will tell of your name to my brothers;

in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!

All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,

and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

24 For he has not despised or abhorred

the affliction of the afflicted,

and he has not hidden his face from him,

but has heard, when he cried to him.

25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;

my vows I will perform before those who fear him.

26 The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;

those who seek him shall praise the LORD!

May your hearts live forever!

27 All the ends of the earth shall remember

and turn to the LORD,

and all the families of the nations

shall worship before you.

28 For kingship belongs to the LORD,

and he rules over the nations.

29 All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;

before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,

even the one who could not keep himself alive.

30 Posterity shall serve him;

it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;

31 they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn,

that he has done it.

First Reading: Genesis 17:1–7; 15-16 (ESV):

Abraham and the Covenant of Circumcision

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, 2 that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” 3 Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 4 “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

Isaac’s Birth Promised

15 And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

EPISTLE: Romans 5 : 1–11 (ESV):

Peace with God Through Faith

5 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall

we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 8 : 27–38 (ESV):

Peter Confesses Jesus as the Christ

27 And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, **“Who do people say that I am?”** **28** And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” **29** And he asked them, **“But who do you say that I am?”** Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” **30** And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

31 And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. **32** And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33** But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, **“Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”**

34 And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. 36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? 37 For what can a man give in return for his soul? 38 For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”**

Sermon 9 – Second Sunday of Lent

“Spoiled Hope”

Romans 5:1-11

Dear friends,

What are you willing to die for? Death carries a kind of message behind it when you go to it willingly. This happens in movies and in life, a fellow goes to die for his friends, for innocent people, goes to fight a war for something he believes in, accepts death as a

result of his actions. It's noble and it always is supposed to make you stop and think. Life is awfully precious, we only get one life on this earth, I'm reliably told, so what would be so important as to give that life up? Think of it. You have family, friends, church members, community and all sorts of people who love and care about you. What would make you give all that up? Paul notes this in our epistle lesson for today. He does this to highlight the incredible contrast between how people look at this question and how God looks at this question. People see life as precious and spend it only when something incredibly meaningful is at stake, most of the time. God sees life as far more precious than we do, and yet He insists on spending that life in excruciatingly painful ways in order to do something far more than just die for the cause. God is not like us. Paul reminds us why this is such a good thing today.

This is Romans, baby, which means that this is considered, deliberate, and elaborate. It is all there in Romans, this is step-by-step theology at its absolute finest. Paul is making an overarching argument in this first part of the book that will culminate in chapter 8, when he talks about how Christian people are both still sinners yet still saved, and that this becomes a fight within us as we wrestle to be good people even when we don't want to be. Paul begins this argument here, showing that this battle is being waged all throughout us, our faith, our hearts, our minds and so on, and it is in the world too, in circumstances, in places, and everywhere we can imagine. Previously to this, carrying on from that step-by-step approach, he has talked about what sin is, putting it in the most stark and severe ways that he can. It is from these words that we know that sin is a disease, an endemic genetic failure that we are all afflicted it. It doesn't matter what we choose or what we do, we're sinners, that is who we've been bred to be and we cannot escape it. It is after that grim analysis that he comes to what he says in our lesson.

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” Explaining this

seems ridiculous. Barely a Sunday or Wednesday has passed where I don't reiterate this in some way or other. Paul tells us sin makes us evil, corrupt, beyond salvation. *Not good* in every way that matters. Completely. It is so difficult to believe that because we have lived with Christ's righteousness for so long. It is so difficult to believe because we know plenty of perfectly nice people who have no faith. God tells us that these human judgments are just more sin. We've screwed it up. Paul describes this as war with God, a natural state of enemy and enemy. Now he goes on to say that this is done, because Jesus has turned us from God's enemies to God's friends. Moreover, Paul says, this isn't just a problem-and-solution situation, it grants us access by faith into grace. That's quite the word salad, but in the simplest terms that means God likes us because we believe that Christ did all the things that Christ did. We believe that the Bible says happened, we believed it happened for us. We have access to God. It is a gift so easy to underestimate and take for granted. That is why we still talk about sin, to remind us that this is in no way anything we deserve or have earned. Christ earned it for us by His perfect, sinless life and His equally perfect and sinless death. We have free access to God's A-list, and God Himself holds the door open for us. This is truly the greatest of gifts, and one we make use of every Sunday. Here in church we re-admit ourselves to God's presence, tell Him the things we need, and receive the things we offer.

Paul also talks about rejoicing in hope. Rejoicing is something very hard to manage these days, we have little to rejoice over in the true sense of the word. Yet what we do have shines bright, and Paul reminds us of that. We have hope. That is a true treasure, and I've only come to appreciate it in the past couple of years. Hope. Things will get better. We know things will get better, because we know God has promised us just that, and we trust Him. Will they get better here? Maybe, maybe not, but they will be infinitely better in the life to come, and that is the hope that God challenges us to truly trust. I hardly need to tell you that this is difficult, almost impossible. Why? Because of what hope is. I've seen over the past couple of years that hope is like milk or meat. It'll last for a while, sometimes

quite a while, but eventually, like milk or meat, it spoils. It curdles. You can only hope for so long before it turns on you. In my experience, curdled hope, spoiled hope, tastes like bitterness, it tastes like anger and betrayal. It twists like a knife. You know what you were promised, but it hasn't come. Christians are susceptible to this, because God's promises, particularly Christ's return and the new world to come, are on quite the timeline, a timeline that seems beyond any of us, considering how many generations have lived and died while we've waited for God. He told us He'd come back. He told us He was making a new earth where there is no sin or death. And we're still waiting for him to deliver.

How do you refresh your hope? This is the puzzle that has occupied me these past months. I can safely say I've tried most legal and moral earthly measures, and they at best served as distractions. Remember, our hope is not strictly an emotion, it is the spiritual orientation of our souls. If that's the case, this isn't a mental illness or something like that. This something the Word of God must speak on, and thankfully, Paul does speak on it. What he says, though, doesn't really make a lot of emotional sense. **“3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”** Whooo okay Paul. I want to do repackage this for you, because the whole rejoicing in sufferings thing isn't really supported by what the Greek says here. You can render it that way and its fine, there's things to learn from that, but I want to say this a different way. The Greek word for rejoice is the same word for boast, for anticipation, and, this is most key, for understanding. So Paul could be saying we rejoice in our sufferings I guess, but Paul also could be telling us we can anticipate our sufferings and understand our sufferings. That makes much more sense to me, because the Bible tells us we are not masochists nor are we required to be. We are not to fetishize suffering in some kind of exceedingly weird and slightly creepy way. Our faith gives us the means to understand it instead. What does this have to do with hope? Look at what Paul

says. All this is a chain, the understanding of why we hurt the ways we do, and the way we put up with those hurts, is how our hope is renewed. That's how you keep hope from curdling, is by suffering and enduring those sufferings. That is not what I want to hear at all. I don't want to hear my trials are making me stronger, I want those darn trials to darn well end. I don't want to hear that this is good for me when everything in my heart screams that it is not. Yet that is what God says. Our Christian hope is kept fresh by the endurance we exercise, by the trust we show God. It's a game of conflict, our endurance pitted against our trials, and what comes out on top is always our faith. In a way, this is an incredible blessing of God. We would think trials would break us, wear us down, make our hope spoil faster. They do not. Thanks be to God, they do not. We Christians are so difficult to deal with, and part of me loves that about our faith. Persecute Christians, we grow stronger. Kill one, three more takes his place. We're like the worst kind of cockroaches, we Christians, you just can't get rid of us. I like that. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger indeed, but that credit is to the hope that God strengthens within us, not our own efforts. God pours that hope into us through the funnel of trial.

“6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Paul deals with the question I asked at the beginning. You're not going to lay down your life for someone just off the street. You're not going to do it for a stranger, not unless there's something else going on. Christ did it for us when we were His enemies. God is not like us. He values life so much He sent His son to die for us when we were godless, evil,

and every kind of bad you could think of. We're not worthy of Him, but He didn't care about that, He cared about making us worthy. If all that is true, if God didn't abandon us when we were at our absolute worst, why would He abandon us now? We are saved by His life, not ours, and that means God loves us because of Jesus' life, not our own. All that you see here, all the evil, the injustices, the little petty tyrannies at work in our world, that is the wrath of God playing out against sin. It is killing our world just like it is killing us. But what you do not see is what Paul promises. That we are reconciled, that we receive that reconciliation daily, that Christ is on our side and showing us His love. That is something you cannot see, not by itself. It is only something you can hear. Working together, our sufferings, our evil, our sin, and His promises are the ingredients to perfect the Christian recipe. Each of you is a slurried mixture of both. Your sins are yours, but Christ's forgiveness for your sins is also yours, and your good works are yours.

Hope is precious, and these days it doesn't seem to last. What Christ gives you, though, is the hope not in yourself, your life, or this world, but the hope that He is in you, that He loves you, and that He is bringing you through the lightning and the tempest into the green pastures just like He promises. Renew that hope, keep it from curdling into bitterness or despair, by hearing those promises again. They're still real. They're still ongoing. Christ still saves His people, and He still cares for them, come what may.

Amen.