

## Sermon: **Into the Depths**

Lesson: 1 Peter 3: 18-22

Lesson: Mark 1: 9-15

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Welcome to the season of Lent! For some this is a very meaningful season, but for some Lent is the season of the church that we are not sure we want to celebrate, not sure how to celebrate. It is a season of reflection, a season of penitence, a season of preparation. We are not sure we have the time or inclination to celebrate this season.

We are so busy. As William Placher says in his book, The Triune God, "Life is busy, and we have so many choices to make between one product and another that ultimate questions easily get lost in the shuffle." (p. 21). This would be true of Advent as well, but in Advent we are looking ahead to the joyous birth of a child, a holy child. And while in Lent we are looking forward to the glorious resurrection, we know that we must first go through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to get there – and we don't want to do that. So much we don't want to do that, that many of us simply choose not to travel that route. We wave palms on one Sunday and return the next to celebrate Easter – blithely skipping over those difficult days between the two.

Our approach to Lent is similar to the modern approach to all life. We live in a duality of life – on the one hand we are constantly chasing betterment: reinvention of the self, self-critique, self-help books. We scrutinize the ways in which we can improve ourselves, get along better in the world. On the other hand, we are facile in justifying self-indulgence, self-actualization, and in seeking self-fulfillment. The one point in common in our focus on self.

While this focus on self and self-betterment might appear to be in line with the concept of penitence, it misses the mark by a long shot. It turns the gift of Christ on its head and leaves us without hope. We are not called to consider our sins so that we might repent and find Christ.

We are called to focus on Christ, who then reveals our sins for what they are, and draws us out of the depths into the light of God through repentance.

We may cry to be lifted out of the depths of our sinful lives, but Christ comes into the depths through the Incarnation. Through his birth, his baptism, the Spirit's driving him into the wilderness toward temptation, his proclamation of the good news of God's heavenly kingdom, Christ enters the world of sin and engages the powers of evil for us. Through his life, death, and resurrection Christ declares the power of sin and of death to be conquered, and invites us to share in this victory through repentance.

Jesus Christ comes into the depths where we are, not just to lead us up or to restore what we have lost or to comfort us in our suffering, but through his presence to create a whole new reality, a radically new context for our lives.

David Kelsey describes this new context in his book, Imagining Redemption. Kelsey suggests that the transition to this new life which Jesus Christ creates for us is like taking a painting and reversing the foreground and the background (pp. 38-39), so that what was in the background, what was subtly seen, perhaps even a bit fuzzy, becomes sharp and clear and the focus of the painting. What was in the front of the picture, what had been the focus, seemingly the most important thing, becomes the background – integral to the picture, but no longer the focus.

If in Lent, or at any other time of our lives, we focus on our sins as a means of receiving forgiveness, and we keep Christ in the background solely or primarily for what Christ can do for us in the way of forgiveness, we are still lost, wandering in the wilderness of temptation and sin. If, however, we allow Christ to become the focus, the entire emphasis changes. The sins are still visible, in fact may become even clearer, but their power to control and to destroy us is

overwhelmed by Christ's power to redeem.

As it is written in the 1<sup>st</sup> Peter passage read earlier, "it is better to suffer for doing good, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." Suffering itself is not glorified, but when it comes in the context of our move toward wholeness in God, it can be seen as something worth enduring.

Christ as the focus does not make our life or the life around us unimportant – quite the contrary. The Incarnation is God's exclamation point that redemption is not limited to a free pass into heaven once we die. This world and this life is important to God. It is too important to God for God to leave it in the self-oriented state which sin directs it.

God's love in Jesus Christ transforms the way we see each other, and ourselves. Finding our value in God's love for us, seeing ourselves in the light of Christ, frees us to confront all within us that is less than what would glorify God. It will not be easy to face these sinful habits and natures, but we do not face them alone. Christ has ventured into the depths to transform how we see our sins, to transform what we believe we can be as part of God's heavenly kingdom.

Finding the value of others in God's love for them as seen in Jesus Christ changes the way we relate to one another. No longer can we approach others as objects – whether as means to an end or as beings we can dismiss as irrelevant to our lives, as pitiable, or as obstacles to our desires. People, and all the rest of creation, are *God's* creation, fellow citizens of the world for whom Christ died and was raised from the dead. When we focus on Christ, Christ's light of righteousness and love shines over the whole of our life, exposing what is sinful so that we can see it for what it is – worthless, damaging, weight that keeps us from moving freely. If we focus on ourselves, this exposure of our sinful selves is impossible to bear, humiliating and demoralizing. Driven by the Spirit to face our sins and temptations, we find ourselves side by

side with Christ, the Christ who faced temptation and prevailed, the Christ who is the fulfillment of God's promise to redeem. In this light, the sins to which we have clung so tenaciously are now less appealing, mere shadows of the life to which we are called.

As we embrace the season of Lent, we gather at Christ's Holy Table to receive the feast which Christ sets before us. At this table Christ our Risen Redeemer is our host. At this table we do remember Christ's sacrifice and his suffering, and we do proclaim his death, but we do not recall his death as those who live without hope. For here too we rejoice that Christ has risen from the dead, has conquered death and sin, and lives in our lives.

Christ invites us to sit at this table as his guests, to experience his life-giving presence, and even more than that. Christ offers to us through this meal, the privilege of being one with him, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Robert Frost wrote:

Christ came to introduce a break with logic  
That made all other outrage seem as child's play:  
The Mercy on the Sin against the Sermon.  
Strange no one ever thought of it before Him.  
'Twas lovely and its origin was love.  
(“A Masque of Mercy,” quote found in Placher's *The Triune God*)

Draw near to the new reality; this cosmic break with logic that is nonetheless the ground of all being and the fullness of reason. Draw near to the life which has Christ as its focus, the context into which all else is placed. Draw near to and receive the Living Christ at this table, throughout this season, in all aspects of your life, for all eternity.