

Has Come Near

Today is the first Sunday of the Lenten season. It's a time for us to reflect on what Jesus has done, and keeps doing, for us. When I was getting things ready for this worship series, *Depths of Love*, I decided to focus our second reading this morning on one of the epistles, rather than the Gospel of Mark, because the lectionary passage was covered in January, with the Baptism of Jesus. There are a couple verses, though, that I want to give you, to keep in mind this morning as we look momentarily at our epistolary lesson.

Mark records that after Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, "the Spirit sent Him into the wilderness and He was there forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals and angels attended Him," (1:13). Mark also records that John the Baptist was put into prison shortly thereafter, and Jesus started His public ministry, saying, "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (1:15). This is a key idea – that the kingdom of God has come near – which we often miss when we look at the world around us.

We might be tempted to say something to the effect of, "Well, where is it then? I don't see it – the world's a mess!" The world is a mess, for sure, and has been ever since humanity decided in the garden, to be "like God, knowing good and evil," (Gen. 3:5). With these things in mind, let's turn to our epistolary lesson this morning, found in the closing verses of the third chapter of Peter's first letter. **Read 1 Peter 3:18-22.**

Jesus Died for the Unrighteous

This morning's reading opens with quite a statement by Peter. He says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit," (1 Pet. 3:18). This is a beautiful summary of what we celebrate and remember during Lent. Jesus did all this, for the sake of "the unrighteous." See, Jesus didn't die for the self-identifying righteous folks of the world. The Pharisees and Sadducees – they had no part in Jesus – they didn't need Him. Or so they thought.

They thought they were made holy – or righteous – by the works they were doing. They were doing stuff like praying publicly in the synagogues and temple. They gave large offerings at the offering stations, so that when they threw their coins in, they'd draw attention with all the racket. They were real good at following all the rituals that had been passed down by their ancestors.

Jesus dying for the unrighteous doesn't sound all that appealing when we get into our natural assumptions that we're righteous – there are a lot of people running around

here in Shelby County this morning thinking they are righteous. We may think that the unrighteous folks Peter's talking about are the ones who "speak maliciously" about our good behavior up there in verse 16. Sometimes we assume that "unrighteous" people are the ones with whom we disagree about things like politics, climate change, and gender stuff. The problem we have when we read this is that Peter wrote it with you and me being lumped into that group with "the unrighteous."

We are among those for whom the righteous Christ allowed Himself to be crucified. That's something we must never forget – the only thing righteous about us is Jesus Christ. In another letter, written by Paul, he tells us:

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of His blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – He did it to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:20-26).

Jesus Does the Hard Work

This is the Good News! Jesus does the hard and heavy work of making us right with God. There's not a thing we can do on our own to make ourselves right with God – we need Jesus to do it for us. He fixes our relationship with God, and with others – when we let Him.

Paul says in Romans that God "left the sins committed beforehand unpunished," and Peter echoes this point, in a way. Peter writes, "After being made alive, He [Jesus] went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits – to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built," (1 Pet. 3:19-20a). When you think back to the Genesis account of Noah and the ark, there were a lot of people who didn't have a boarding pass. If they weren't in the ark, they died.

Usually when we talk about people dying, we compartmentalize them into one of two groups – those going to Heaven, and those going to the other place. It's interesting when you really start reading Scripture, though, because it's not nearly so black and white. There are a lot of heroes of the faith in Genesis, and in the Old Testament. Guys

like Abraham, Job, Jacob, Joseph, David, and when you read some of the things they say, you get the sense that they weren't sure of what would happen to them. Getting to heaven wasn't on their bucket lists.

Take Jacob, for example. After his sons decide to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt, and made it look like Joseph had been torn to pieces by a wild animal, "Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. 'No,' he said, 'I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave,'" (Gen. 37:34-35). The original Hebrew word we translate as "grave," is "Sheol," a place in the Jewish faith, where all souls – whether they were righteous or wicked – went. In the New Testament the word is translated as "Hades."

He Descended into Hell

If you look at Luke 16:19-31, Jesus talks about this place in a parable about the rich man and Lazarus. The righteous and wicked are separated by a great chasm that cannot be crossed. The area the righteous end up in is known as "Abraham's bosom," while the wicked rich man is sent to a place of burning torment. If you get a chance to read that parable later today, I think you'll agree that the rich man's place of torment sounds a lot like Hell. If you turn to page 881 and 882 in the *United Methodist Hymnal*, you'll see two versions of the Apostles' Creed.

Check out the traditional version at the top of the page, and what it says about Jesus. Do you see where it says, "was crucified, dead, and buried;*"? Notice what the notation indicates at the bottom of the page. It reads, "Traditional use of this creed includes these words: 'He descended into hell.'" So, if we were to read this the way the Church read it back in 400's and 500's, we would read:

And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord:
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended into hell.
The third day He rose from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.¹

The idea of Christ descending into Hades – Hell – after He was buried on Good Friday comes from the epistolary writings of Peter and Paul. It's become a core belief of the Church. In His unconditional love towards all people, God provides a pathway for

¹ The Apostles' Creed, Traditional Version, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing, 1989), page 881.

people who had died in their sins before Jesus came down, to be redeemed. The love of God expressed to humanity through the blood of Christ shed on the cross is so remarkable that it can be hard for people – especially those new in the faith – to believe. And so God meets them where they are, in every age, in an effort to lead them into a living relationship with Himself.

Baptism and the Flood

Peter concludes by giving us an important metaphor for the Sacrament of Baptism, using Noah's ark and the flood as an image. He says:

In it [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to Him, (1 Pet. 20b-22).

Our Baptismal Covenant in the hymnal has an amazing liturgy, known as “The Thanksgiving Over the Water,” as part of the service. That prayer uses water as a visible reminder of the redeeming work God has done through the ages. I'll be honest, I didn't know we had such a deep connection with Old Testament heroes through Baptism – because I'd never seen it used here before I became your pastor in 2020. The connections we have with heroes past need to be remembered, and occasionally renewed. We do that each year on the first Sunday in January, with a service for the Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant.

See friends, it isn't just the bad people who talk maliciously about Christians' good behavior that need salvation. It's not just the people who wouldn't listen to God long ago when Noah built the ark who need God's salvation. It's not even just the eight God-worshiping people in Noah's family that needed salvation. It's all of us – every person who has ever lived, and will ever live – who need God's salvation. God tells us, through Peter, to rescue people – Jesus' friends – through baptism. It's not about washing off dirt, but rather a sign and seal that we are now marked men and women who belong to God.

In some traditions of the Church, like the one I grew up in, people were baptized after they could make a confession of faith on their own. And then they were baptized by immersion in a tank or pool of water. There's some great symbolism there, of being buried with Christ, and rising to new life in Him. We've done a few of those here, with a cattle trough that's out in the shed, or a few Easters ago down at Michael's pond. The point of all this is just to say, that the water's a sign – it doesn't save us – our faith in the blood of Jesus Christ spilled at the cross is what saves us.

Christ suffers on our behalf, and Christ claims us in baptism. He doesn't claim us after we're cleansed, and not on account of our righteousness, but in opposition to what we deserve, He makes us another Noah in another flood and another drowning out of the sinner. We don't get what we deserve. Instead, He comes near – He takes on our sins and problems, and we're baptized in His name – He delivers us from the power of sin and death through His suffering, and saves us.

Prayer: God of the living, through baptism we pass from the shadow of death to the light of the resurrection. Remain with us and give us hope that, rejoicing in the gift of the Spirit who gives life to our mortal flesh, we may be clothed with the garment of immortality, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.