

Pathway to the Cross: *God's Provision of Grace*©
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:1-21 February 18, 2018 Rev. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

First Sunday in Lent

Today we begin. The Ash Wednesday service was actually the beginning of our Lenten Season. It was a time for reflection on our mortality, our frailty. We considered what we need to turn from and how we can fill it with time for God.

We went out with the sign of the cross made with ashes on our foreheads and a reminder that we are dust and to dust we will return. But we also heard the assurance that no matter what, we belong to God and He loves us and goes with us throughout our lives.

It is a somber way to begin the season – thinking about our mortality. Realizing up front what we know in the back of our minds – that we will eventually die. And while we who are Christians believe we will have eternal life, the thought of our death is not something we care to dwell on. Or should dwell on.

There is a song I heard, sung by Allison Krause that says, “Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.” That’s true I think for us all.

But it is important for us to occasionally stop the chaotic roller coaster we are on and just be still and face the fact that we are human and frail, and we really do depend on God; we truly do need a Savior to save us from death.

We heard the story from the Old Testament that Randy read where the people had turned from God and because of that, God sent poisonous snakes to bite them and many of the Israelites were dying. They begged to be saved and so God had mercy and told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole and then when the people looked up and saw it they did not die. They were saved.

God provided salvation for the people even though they were disobedient and had turned against God because of their lack of trust in His care. And yet, that wasn’t a permanent fix. The people still sinned. They still rebelled. They still died.

And so, we fast forward hundreds of years later to a time and place where God has finally entered our world in a very human way – through his own Son, Jesus. And this Son would be the provision of grace that would be the final cure for death – once and for all.

Nicodemus come to him, asking questions, too embarrassed or uncomfortable, or maybe afraid to come to Jesus in broad daylight so he sneaks out and comes to talk to him in the dark. He has questions, but he doesn’t want the other temple leaders (like he was) to know that he had questions or that he would even be so curious as to come to this man whom they had decided was a quack.

Don't judge him though. We do it too, don't we? We wonder about things, but we don't really want people to know that either we're that ignorant, or that we are that interested. There are times when I hear something in a conversation and I'm not quite sure about what is being said. I might not feel I really know about a subject or an event or person they are talking about. So I mentally make a note and as soon as I can, I Google it.

I'd rather look something up on the internet than to simply admit I am not knowledgeable about that particular thing. God forbid that anyone think I don't know everything about everything!

Or, I've had people who are not Christians but are of another faith, secretly write me in a private message, asking questions but not wanting their friends to know they are curious.

I think we have to give Nick some kudo's for being brave enough to come and ask Jesus these questions, rather than just buy into the judgmental decisions his peers had already made. Nick didn't know it, but it was the first day of his Lenten journey – following the pathway of Jesus to the cross.

And we know he did, eventually anyway, because he was there when Jesus was on trial and when he died. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, stood in Jesus defense in that mock trial the Sanhedrin's gave him. Nicodemus didn't win out, but he stood up for Jesus.

And when Jesus was crucified on that horrible cross, Nicodemus was there with expensive oils to anoint Jesus' dead body.

The wind blows where it will, Jesus told him. And it certainly blew over Nicodemus and led him to the cross with Jesus. Nick didn't understand, that night, what Jesus meant when he said you must be born again. But surely, by the time he was there with the Savior he had begun to see that he, himself, had taken on a different, new life.

Jesus said to him the thing most all of us know by heart. That God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but would have everlasting life; that God didn't send the Son to condemn the world but to save the world.

This time, instead of the people looking up at a bronze serpent, they would look up at an old rugged cross and see the Son of God hanging there in their place, so that, while death would come, so would grace; so would forgiveness; so would new life – life that would be eternal.

This time, this saving provision of grace would never end. No matter what. It will be done. The people will be saved from their sins. Death will not be the end. Just as God would raise the Son from death to life, so he will raise his children – all who believe in his Son – from death to life as well. That's good news. That's great news! That's Easter news.

So why do we need to go on this somber Lenten path each year if we have all that good news already? Some denominations don't observe Lent. And they seem to be fine with that. Which is okay.

But, going back to the beginning of this sermon – back to Ash Wednesday when we seriously took the time to reflect on our own mortality; on how fragile we are – it’s true, isn’t it? We don’t really like the idea of dying. We look in the mirror at our faces and we notice there are more lines this year than last. We see bodies a little more saggy and stooped. We have more health issues. Or we watch our loved ones aging, struggling, sometimes suffering.

We are aware of how human we are and frankly, if we are honest, it’s a little scary. Everybody wants to go to heaven. But nobody wants to die.

So, it seems like taking this time before Easter is kind of important. At least I think it is. It’s good if we can slow down just a little; maybe take a little more time for reflection and prayer. Take a closer look at what our lives look like and see if there are things that aren’t as important as we place them – things that get in the way of our closeness to God.

Why is it so important to be close to God? Well, the thing is, we should want to be out of love and gratitude for that provision of grace he has given us in Jesus, our Savior. Just because he is so loving and gracious to us; just because he calls us his children, we should want to develop a close relationship with him.

But also, when we come to those rocky places in life, when we are feeling dry and withered; when we are suffering and dying – think about it – probably none of those things we hold in such high priority in our lives are going to really matter or see us through. Maybe a few things will help. People will encourage. Our habits might deaden the pain.

But we who are human need a Savior. We need God to hold us and walk with us. We need trust – deep trust – that God will get us through to the other side. Humans and things are not capable of getting us there.

Building that relationship is the most important thing we can do. So, Lent is about focusing on that relationship – however you can do it. You might give up something that fills a space that could be emptied so you have more space and time for prayer and journaling. You might add a spiritual discipline that you’ve never done or have let go somewhere along the way.

Whatever you do, I hope you come here to walk together on this path with Jesus throughout Lent. Our theme is The Pathway to the Cross. We will walk with Jesus through the gospel of John, stopping with him along the way to learn important lessons from him; to learn more about who he is and how he wants us to live too.

The path is steep and hard sometimes but with Jesus we can do it. Together we will file along and follow in his footprints. Step by step we will walk where he walks until we get to the cross. And there we will see once again, God’s provision of grace. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life.

Come. Let’s begin the journey.