

Lent 4

For God So Loved the World

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3,17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, Holy God: Father Son and Holy Spirit.+

Well, here we are, halfway through the season of Lent, on Laetare Sunday – that mid-way point like it's sister, Gaudete Sunday in Advent, that marks a special time to pause; that calls us to a little rest and refreshment. Both of these special days are named for joy – Gaudete meaning “Rejoice!” and Laetare meaning “Oh, be joyful!” Our hymns are lighter, and remind us of the Good News, even as we prepare for the coming weight of Holy Week. It is the time where, midway along the road that strains towards Golgotha, we remember what came *after* the cross – what could only have come *by way of* the cross - the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ! Oh, be joyful – he is risen, and among us!! What a joy to be able to say that, here in the middle of Lent.

We have been faithfully marking these days of purple: days of remembrance, days of penitence, days of bearing with Jesus, as best we can, the weight of what looms ahead for him as we approach Holy Week. But in the midst of this heavy walk, I have, with great joy, been hard at work designing the liturgy for what, to me, is the most powerful and glorious liturgy of the church – the Great Vigil of Easter. This is the service which, as many of you know, takes place on the night *before* Easter, and begins in the darkness- dark as the tomb. We light the First Paschal Fire of Easter – the light of Christ - and spread that light throughout the dark sanctuary, reminding us that we are the bearers of Christ's light in the world. Then the great moment comes when the celebrant announces, “*Christ is Risen!*” and the entire church fills with light and sound and beauty, bells ringing, the great organ sounding, and banners unfurling as we lift our hearts to sing the Gloria. It is the most extraordinary and triumphant phrase - “Christ is Risen!” – and it has been haunting my dreams for weeks.

Because, you see, this is Extraordinary News; triumphant news: that God so loved the world, so loved us, that he gave us his only Son - who willingly became incarnate for us; who walked and taught, healed and preached for us; who willingly gave himself up to the cross. Jesus knew that, to make his death one that would encompass all possible deaths, that would offer solidarity to every possible suffering, he would choose crucifixion, death, the cold dark of the tomb, and the sealing of the stone. Until the moment when his eyelids fluttered, then opened, and he raised up, unwound the linen wrappings, and stood – Risen! From death! Christus Victor! Christ is Risen, lifting us to eternal life with him. And this triumphant, miraculous fact is what should haunt us; it should make us shake our heads in wonder; *it should shake us*: this is what God gave his only Son for.

God loved the world this much: God loves us so much. Think of how many ways God tried to teach us, to guide us: First in the garden, then in the flood; later in the wilderness; then on Mt. Sinai with the law finally written in stone for us hard headed types; then the prophets with their detailed codes of conduct and behavior, all with the intention of teaching us how

to live as God's people: how to walk as children of God. But the law and the prophets just weren't enough, were they. And so, because of God's love for us, because of God's longing for us, God tried something new, something radically different: God tried love. "*Love divine; all love excelling; Joy of heaven, to earth come down...*" Love incarnate came to us: Jesus - known to us as the Lord of Love ever since we were little children. As signs and reminders of Jesus' love for us, we have all the gifts of his incarnation: his words, his teachings and actions, his life, his death, his resurrection.

But how often do we think about God's love? God's love for us can seem a lot less tangible. God's actions are often seen as being in such broad strokes - the creation of heaven and earth, the parting of the Red Sea, all the mighty acts of God - that we can be unaware of the detailed movements, the particular synchronicity of God's hand in our individual lives. This attention to our lives is all about God's love for us, and on this day of refreshment, I urge you to take some time to think about how God has taken care of you, in little ways and in amazing ways; in times of plenty and in times of scarcity, like these.

This week during our Lenten series of "Faith in Troubled Times," our guest speaker, the Rev. Dr. Bill Matthews, spoke to us about how we deal with the myriad sources of stress in our lives. Our nation is, as we all know, in the midst of a profound "leveling," and we are all struggling to hold steady in the midst of this upheaval. Bill+ talked about the importance of what we think about, what we allow ourselves to dwell on. He reminded us of the simple fact that what we think has a direct affect on how we feel. If we dwell on the worst case scenario, on our habitual litany of worries, we feel scared, hopeless, angry. If we focus on what is positive in our lives, we feel more hopeful, more energetic. Rev. Matthews reminded us of the easily forgotten art of counting our blessings, and giving thanks. It takes a willingness to look for these blessings sometimes, but you will find them, and there will be plenty to count!

I urge you to step back and look at the big picture of your life, and see how God has guided you and guarded you. How have your times of desolation turned into blessing? How have you seen God find a way to turn our poor choices into building blocks for our greater good? God knows that we can tend to "*love darkness,*" as we heard in John's Gospel today - our free will is such a tricky gift - but as John reminds us, "*the Light has come into the world,*" to show us the way out of the darkness. This light is the light of Christ, given out of God's love for us, given for the sake of the whole world.

On this Sunday when we take a little rest from the heavy weight of Lent, let's think about God's love for us. Let this day of refreshment be also a day of counting our blessings, and of deepest thanksgiving, to the God who loved us *so much* that he gave his only Son, to be our light in the darkness.

Amen.

The Rev. Julia Fritts
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