

Lent 3 (2023)

I am willing to bet that at least some of you have a book like the one I am holding in my hand. It's a baby book and was mostly likely filled out by your mother. It tells the story of your birth and development over the first five or so years of your life.

Little ones are gifts from God. You are a gift from God. I am a gift from God. We did not ask to be born into this world, but here we are.

But there is more. As Christians we are doubled gifted, doubled born. I am thinking of when we were baptized, marked as Christ's own and welcomed into God New Covenant family.

At that time, the victory of Jesus over sin, Satan and death achieved on the cross and witnessed on Easter morning by the empty tomb became ours by promise and faith.

The fearful specter of death which stalked all men was banished . . . at least in principle.

I am reminded of a story about old Bishop Candler of the Methodist Church. When this godly man lay dying, a friend asked him if he feared crossing the river of death.

His response came without hesitation: **“No, why should I? My Father owns the land on both sides of the river.”**

Clearly, he had gotten the message proclaimed in Christian baptism. In this sacrament, we die and are raised with Christ. The enemy has been disarmed.

All of which to say, we are people of grace. God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Paradise lost in Adam has been restored in Christ.

We may not understand *how* this has been accomplished – the mechanics of the atonement – but it is a fact and we receive it by faith.

During the coming week, why not remind yourself of what God has done for you by saying this affirmation: “All that I possess, am or hope for eternity . . . life itself . . . is gift. I am a person of grace.”

The children of Israel as they stood on the far side of Jordan just before entering the Promised Land could say the same thing.

In the chapter just preceding the one from which today’s Old Testament lesson comes, we hear God say: **“I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”**

Which is to say: God had done it. By grace they had come thus far. Even when they had been faithless, murmured against Moses and against God Himself, God had not turned loose of them. He had remained faithful to the covenant He had made to their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Again, all was gift.

This past week I stood alongside a long-standing member of St. Luke’s on the far side of the church yard . . . over against Willa Street. As we looked at the church, I asked:

“Did you think back in the ‘90s when we were meeting in the City Hall that we would have such a building?”

His answer was no. Mine was the same. God had done way above anything we could have imagined in those early days.

Words of Psalm 118:23 came to mind: **“This is the Lord’s doings, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”**

Like God's ancient people looking over Jordan, we are people of grace. What should our response be?

We get our answer in today's Old Testament reading. People of grace should be **people of obedience**. Listen to what Moses says to the children of Israel as they prepare to go over Jordan:

“Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it.”

The key word is 'do'. James in the New Testament gives followers of Jesus the same command: **“Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.”**

Many today view obeying someone else's rules oppressive and stultifying. **“I don't need anyone telling me what to do,”** they say, **“I want to do it my way.”**

But does that really work? Think about buying a washing machine. With that washing machine comes a set of instruction. In a printed bulletin, the manufacturer tells you how to get the best results out of your new appliance:

--Don't put in too many clothes.

--Use the amount of detergent recommended for the size of your machine.

--Don't put bleach directly on clothes in the tub. Use the dispenser provided for that purpose.

--Make sure the machine is level and water hoses connected before operating, and so on.

These are your ‘rules’. But let’s suppose you say: **“What does the manufacturer know. To heck with him, I’m going to do it my way.”**

If you choose to do so, no one is going to stop you, but don’t be surprised when your white sheets come out pink and grandma’s dainty underthings get mangled.

Something similar happens when we disregard God’s law. It’s not that we can’t, but failing to follow the rules has consequences.

And this is what has happened in the West over the past 50 or so years. The rules previous generations acknowledged (even if they did not always completely obey) have been cast aside. Personal autonomy has taken center stage, and we are reaping the consequences.

Following in the wake of throwing out God’s rules are: broken homes; emotional distress; distrust of anyone in authority; anarchy in the streets; young people, especially young males with no role models, aimless and floundering . . . the fabric of civilized society coming unrivaled.

How long can we go on this way? How long can this republic last? Well, only God knows, but we need to know the cause and do what we can to be light and be ready to pick up those who fall . . . and they are all around us.

This past week I passed one of those illuminated church signs with a thought for the week. This one read: **“Sin is a short word with a long sentence.”**

I think what was meant was that failing to follow God’s rules has long-reaching consequences, many of them not pretty.

A moment of illicit ecstasy often leads to a lifetime of heartache. Just ask King David following the Bathsheba affair.

“Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay,” said the Indian-born Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias.

Ironically and very sadly, following Mr. Zacharias’ death in 2020, facts came to light which suggested that Mr. Zacharias knew firsthand of what he spoke.

There were revelations that he was leading a double life. As a result, his legacy was destroyed, his good name forever tarnished and the organization he established in shambles.

But what about God’s way? Well, just as the washing machine manufacturer knows the best way to operate his machine, so God knows the best way for us to live.

Going God’s way leads to human flourishing and happiness. Going our way leads to slavery and misery.

In this season of Lent, take a look at your life. What are some of the things you know God commands, things which are good and life-giving, but which you have left to slide?

Maybe it’s being faithful in public worship, or having down time – a day of rest -- or resisting the ever-present temptation to make material things the supreme focus and end-all of life.

And this brings me to my closing point. Obedience must be coupled with **discipline**. Spiritual transformation, growth in grace, putting aside those habits that stunt our growth and finally destroy . . . these things don’t just fall into laps. No, we must pursue them. Personal discipline is required.

Today’s OT passage tells us as much when it speaks about being deliberate in passing on the faith to the next generation.

“And thou shalt teach them [God’s precepts] diligently unto thy children . . . thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand . . . thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.”

Christians have not been deliberate in this and in many other respects, and this is why the religious landscape of the United States is changing . . . why churches are closing their doors and the number of those claiming to be Christians is in decline.

We’ve let the surrounding culture squeeze us into its mold rather than the other way round. We have gone with flow and have not passed on the faith.

God grant us a new beginning, a new willingness to speak and do and live as God directs . . . coupled with discipline . . . a discipline controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is my prayer for each one of us.