

---

✠ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

**Confronted** with this fact—this certainty—the lessons from our Sundays and Wednesdays in Lent strengthen and prepare us for that inevitability—death, decay, dust.

On Ash Wednesday, we heard our Lord Jesus tell his disciples, *“When you fast.”* Fasting is the central theme in our Lenten lessons. “What is given up for Jesus is never given up in vain. All that is given up in this life is repaid a hundredfold in the life to come.”

On the first Sunday in Lent, we reflected on the Temptation of Jesus. We asked: “Was Jesus at his strongest or at his weakest after fasting for forty days in the wilderness?” We found he was at his strongest. “He had already faced every doubt and every temptation as hungered for forty days. What was a little more hunger, a little more weakness, a little more suffering?”

The following Wednesday, we reflected on the Sign of Jonah. Whereas Nineveh repented at Jonah's preaching, Israel did not repent at the coming of Jesus. So, too, “When we always give in to comforts, to pleasures, to desires, we may be being pulled slowly, or less slowly, from our Lord Jesus. We may indeed need to fast from food or from drink, or from shopping, scrolling, TV, the news — and any other comfort, pleasure, or desire that threatens our faith in Jesus. Let him alone be our comfort, our desire, our delight.”

Then, last Sunday, we heard the Canaanite woman persistently ask Jesus for help. “She fasted from her pride. She was glad to be a house dog—least in the kingdom of God—so long as she is in the kingdom of God—so long as she is with the only one who has the power to heal.” The crumbs of God are enough! Like this woman, let us be delighted to be the least in the kingdom of God, for the kingdom of God is great.”

This past Wednesday, we reflected on James & John's mother asking Jesus for a favor—for her sons to be the greatest in his kingdom. But we found that the only way to climb the greatness ladder of the kingdom of heaven is by climbing down and serving one another—just as our Lord Jesus did. “For one through whom the world was made is the same one who entered the world through the Virgin Mary—the one who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Because of Jesus, Servant is now the greatest of the titles we are eligible to receive. And that means, no matter your age, no matter your status, no matter your circumstances, no matter your agility, no matter your intelligence, you are—still!—in the running for greatness in the Kingdom of God!”

In this morning's lessons, we are confronted with God's Kingdom, and with Satan's continued attempt to steal souls for his own kingdom.

**Turn** to the Gospel of Luke. Jesus cast out a mute demon. And this caused quite the stir, for the people accused him of casting out a demon by the power of Satan. As Jesus points out, this would be a failing tactic, for then the kingdom of Satan would be divided, and a divided kingdom will surely fail and fall. What has taken place instead, is that the kingdom of God has come upon them. It is because Jesus has come, that the demons scatter.

*Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*

How many of you recognize or remember that our baptismal liturgy includes a remnant of an exorcism: “Do you renounce all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises?” This is the confession we make—or that our parents and godparents make for us—that we will no longer join in the works of the devil's kingdom.

This promise matters. Notice that in this very passage, Jesus warns of the return of the demon—one demon returns to its own stomping grounds, bringing seven even more evil demons with it. Jesus is warning the man, the people, and us that such an exorcism will not matter much if we return to the playthings of the demons. The demons do not want to be cast out, and they will return—if possible.

It is not enough to be baptized, to be exorcised, to be members of a congregation. It is not enough to simply hear God's Word.

*But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"*

**I**t is not enough to simply hear God's Word. We must also keep it. If there was anyone in all of human history that could have relied on her works, it would be Mary, the mother of Jesus. She carried the Son of God in her womb; she nursed him and raised him. Surely she is blessed simply because of who she is. That is what the man in the crowd thinks:

*"Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!"*

But no — the Lord Jesus does not let her off so easily. And if the Lord did not privilege his own mother, we can be sure that he will not privilege anyone — anyone except those who hear and obey him.

So, too, it is not enough to merely hear God's promises week after week, year after year, decade after decade, generation after generation. It does not quite work that way. Every generation, every congregation, every person — must wrestle with the faith, must wrestle to keep the faith which was passed down through the ages — the faith which has been passed down, from generation to generation.

This wrestling with faith is something that this congregation has done, but we cannot rely on the laurels of our past; we must continue to keep the faith.

**L**ook at our passage from Jeremiah. I would not have wanted to give the message he was called to preach. Perhaps Jeremiah was the only one with the courage to give that sermon.

He's sent to the Temple courts to preach that the Temple and Jerusalem would be destroyed. It is not a popular message. It's not the kind of thing people want to hear. Yet in truth, it is a message of hope: "Repent! Then the curse will not come upon the Temple or the City or the People."

Do they repent? No! The people do not listen to him. They are ready to kill the only one who brings them the truth, the only one who brings them the real message of hope. Doesn't this sound familiar? There's a reason that the crowds make the connection that Jesus is like the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was ready to die for this sermon—as an innocent man. But Jeremiah finds protection and isn't killed for this sermon. The peoples' rejection of his message meant their death, the city's destruction, and the destruction of the Temple. Judah would become a curse.

But, as we have been hearing about in the study of *Daniel*, even this was a blessing—for the whole empire of Babylon came to know the Lord God. God uses every thing to bring about the knowledge of Him to his people.

**T**urn to our letter from Ephesians. It's exceedingly difficult to square this passage with the sexual "ethics" of the ECLA, of the Episcopal Church, and of the PCUSA.

*For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.*

This is why—and rightly, I think—the way that our denomination (and the ACNA) frames the split with the ELCA is over the question of the Word of God. Is Scripture true, or not? Is Scripture susceptible to error, or not? Is Scripture reliable, or is it just too culturally colored and coded? Think about all of the rest of Scripture — Old & New Testament — that you have to deny in order to dismiss what we just heard from Paul in Ephesians—that "the sexually immoral or impure...has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."

Why is it, in the so-called “more loving” and “more accepting” denominations—like the ELCA, the Episcopal Church, PCUSA, the UCC—their sexual ethic happens to magically match the cultural zeitgeist? How is it that their so-called study of Scripture led them to believe exactly the things that are believed *outside* the Church?

Our culture legitimizes prostitution (and renames it “sex work”), makes pornography common, makes adultery acceptable, and expands it to persons of same-sex or of confused genders. Our culture confesses this creed, “love is love.” Whether sex is moral or immoral today is determined solely on whether the two (or more) persons consent. And so, adultery, pornography, and all the rest, are called moral.

Against all this, we believe—as Christians—is that sex belongs in marriage—and nowhere else.

We find ourselves in a bit of quandary holding fast to this so-called traditional sexual ethic. We will be called bigots. We will be told we are not welcoming or not accepting or inhospitable or any number of other names. We may even, rather ironically, be threatened by the very persons accusing us of being unloving or unwelcoming. I’m sure that Jeremiah was called much worse. He was certainly put through much worse.

But it will do no good, fifteen years into the life of the NALC, to simply stop talking about it. Or to pretend that because the battle was won, that there are no more battles on this front or any other front. That is simply not the case.

*For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.*

This is not a matter of mere preference. The stakes really are this high—the loss of the inheritance of the kingdom of God. This is the danger that awaits those who encourage sexual immorality; this is the danger that awaits those who practice sexual immorality.

And that means that any of those among us who may be caught in this terrible web are to repent, to turn from it, and thus retain the inheritance to which you have been called.

**I**t does not help that the culture deceives and woos and tricks us into believing that it is more moral than the Church and that it has these things right. It has already convinced many denominations to blur the boundaries and follow its sexual ethic—again, at the great cost and risk of the loss of inheritance of the Kingdom of God.

But we can use no such excuses ourselves, especially this congregation who made the costly choice to continue keeping God’s Word. When God confronts us with his Word, we must listen to him. We must *fast* from those voices, those desires, those pleasures, those comforts, which seek to keep us from listening to Him. For,

*“Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”*

Fast from all those things which keep us from listening to God and obeying him. And let us instead place our faith, our hope, our trust, and our love in Jesus.

**Christ** the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.**