

## *First Sunday After Easter*

**Psalm 103** A Psalm of David. Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed. He made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children; To such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them. The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all. Bless the LORD, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word. Bless ye the LORD, all ye his hosts; ye ministers of his, that do his pleasure. Bless the LORD, all his works in all places of his dominion: bless the LORD, O my soul.

**Isaiah 43:1-12** But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life. Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him. Bring forth the blind people that have eyes, and the deaf that have ears. Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth. Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour. I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I am God.

**The Collect.**

ALMIGHTY Father, who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification; Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**The Epistle. 1 John 5:4-12**

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

**Luke 24:36-49** And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And he said unto them, Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he shewed them his hands and his feet. And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, Have ye here any meat? And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. And he took it, and did eat before them. And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high. And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen..

## *The Witness in Ourselves*

I want to quote a part of the book of Isaiah that we read this morning because it's an excellent example of the uncanny inter-relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. We have often spoken of the typological character of the old Testament. And this is an example of why, when Jesus is setting forth his case to the Apostles immediately after the resurrection, Luke says that: "Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things."

And I suspect that there were many passages in Isaiah that Jesus cross-examined as a primary witness to what Jesus is attempting to prove to the Apostles. Listen again to this quotation of Isaiah: "Bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him. Bring forth the blind people that have eyes, and the deaf that have ears. Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth. Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour. I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I am God."

God has chosen us in order to make himself known to us. God has created a kind of courtroom of this creation to set forth his case. He wants us to *know* the truth. He doesn't want us to merely bow before the truth. He wants us to *know* the truth. He is so *determined* that we believe him and know him to be the true God that created this creation, that he will spare no effort, he will bear any burden, he will pay any price to make his case about who he is and who we are.

I read in one of my textbooks recently that the purpose of man is to achieve *unification* with God. Now, this is a very popular religious idea that is common in the world. In the Eastern religions, I have often heard it said that the chief object of religious consciousness is to accept the fact that our consciousness is a complete mirage – that there is only one consciousness and that is the consciousness of God. Even in the West, I've heard people break down the "atonement" to mean "at-one-ment." Now this is a very clever procedure, but it is terrible etymology; that is, word definition. There are many occasions in the gospel of John in which Jesus speaks about achieving oneness with God, but not in the sense of unification. Not in the sense of at-one-ment

When the Berlin wall came down in 1989 through 1990, East and West Berlin became simply, Berlin. The old demarcations between East and West Germany soon dissipated. It was unification through absorption. But when Jesus talks about becoming one with the Father in John he speaks not of absorption, but of something else. Like the Trinity, itself. And that's why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important. If we do not understand the relationship between the Father and the Son and the Spirit, we cannot understand the relationship between the Father and us. Jesus prays that his disciples "may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us." At the high order of the Trinity there is no unification of wills – there is *a perfect alliance* of wills. There are three wills and all three wills agree, just like in John's first letter. There are three basic witnesses to the Gospel: the water of cleansing, the blood of reconciliation and the spirit of enlightenment and empowerment. And all three of these witnesses perfectly agree.

Notice that the most primary aspect of our reading in Isaiah is that God looks at those who are called by his name *as sons and daughters*. The Psalmist muses concerning the status of man: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet." The modern world looks at man and says – he is nothing but a dependent mass of protoplasm that has reproduced to such a degree, with such destructive effects upon the planet - that he is like a cancer. And thus we have seen many well-intentioned religious people throughout all ages competing with each other concerning how low they can crawl to prove to God that they have fully accepted their status as worms – not fit to be called a man<sup>1</sup> or even to live.

In more modern times, we have seen many men who believe and have very strenuously taught that the purpose of man is to accept his *absolute dependence* upon God. Now there is much to be said for this. We *are* absolutely dependent upon God. Because in him we live and move and have our being. But the same could also said about every aspect of this creation – down to its smallest quark and its largest galactic cluster. All is completely dependent upon God. But the witness of Scripture is not a story about a watchmaker making a machine or even a Gepetto making a Pinocchio. The witness of Scripture is about a living God imparting the very essence of his life to his creation. The witness of Scripture is about a living God imparting the very *image* of his character – individually - to the creature called man. And it is at this point that we have entered upon what is folly to the Greeks. And that folly is that God has become our Father in almost the same sense as exists with his only begotten Son. He has *begotten* us – not just made us out of clay or wood. His seed of truth has penetrated the outer, rocky casing of our hearts and has fertilized our soul with the very life of his dear Son. And this time it is not just ordinary, earthly animal life. This time it is divine life. It is eternal life.

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<sup>1</sup> Ps 22:6

And this is not theological mumbo-jumbo. We are not talking about transubstantiation here. We're not talking about purgatory. We're not talking about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. We are talking about something that is witnessed to everywhere in the Bible. Page after page we are constantly encountering this kind of talk - from the beginning of Matthew to the end of the Apocalypse of St. John. The unbelief of the Apostles is the ground upon which God attempts to sew his seed. And contrary to our expectations, we meet this unbelief on page after page of every single Gospel. We can trace this tortuous process through Acts and we can see the conflict between belief and unbelief in everyone of St. Paul's and St. John's epistles. And in the pivotal sermon of St. Stephen that comes to a climax in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, Stephen says: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.<sup>2</sup> He who *believes* the son, has eternal life in him. That's the formula, John says in his epistle. He who does not believe, has rejected the witness of God.

God has come to present us with his case. And he has called three witnesses: the water of cleansing, the blood of reconciliation and the spirit of empowerment. Now, if our souls are a mirage, this dialogue between the spirit of God and our spirits is utter folly. And if our longing to transcend our earthly mediocrity and sin angers a high and Holy and an unapproachable God, than this dialogue between the spirit of God and our spirits is utter folly. And if the freedom of our wills is an insult to God's sovereignty, this dialogue between the spirit of God and our spirits is utter folly.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 7:51-53



But the witness of God is that our wills are not a mirage. They exist. The witness of God is that our beings are not hopelessly contaminated in the vile sludge of this creation. And the witness of God is that we are not mindless automatons that must move in the hands of a master marionette. No. The witness of God is that our wills are sacred gifts of his will. We have a will just like the Son has a will. If we didn't have a will, God's desire for our willing obedience and conformity to his will would make no sense at all. God's appeal to us to believe his witnesses would make no sense at all. The witness of God is that we are not vile worms that he would as soon crush as keep as pets. We are not pets. We are his sons and his daughters. And we are worthy. And we can know that we are worthy because Christ died for us. For that matter, Christ died to redeem all of creation. Because what God made is good. Very good. Though it has fallen under the curse of original sin, it is still very good. And Christ came to prove this. Christ came to bring redemption to the entire cosmos.<sup>3</sup> We have wills because God gave them to us. We have freedom because God gave it to us. And we have worth because Christ died for us.

Although we can't see this is in the last Chapter of Luke, which is a summary of what Christ is attempting to prove to the Apostles, it is quite clear in Luke's second book – the book of Acts, that Christ is spending considerable time with the Apostles, explaining to them who he is and why it was necessary for him to die. His whole life with the apostles prior to his crucifixion was the first part of his witness to them. It was predicated upon a baptism of water. And this forty day period that Jesus spends with the Apostles is the second part of his witness to the Apostles. Now, *Christ's witness is predicated upon a baptism of blood.*

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:21 Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

As we said last week. Repentance is, primarily, *a change of mind*. Anyone can cry over his sins. Esau did it. Judas did it. Peter did it. But unless crying over sins is the first stage of a complete change of our minds - a metamorphosis of the mind - it will be in vain. So it is very important that we pay attention to what is going on this period. What is Jesus saying? What is his attitude? What are the Apostles learning? And this will be our emphasis during the entire 40 day pre-ascension period. If God is making a case for Christ, what case is he making? If God wants us to have a radical change of mind, what kind of mind does he want us to have?

We talked last week about the unusual meeting between Christ and St. Thomas: "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing."<sup>4</sup> And in our reading from Luke this morning we hear: "Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he showed them his hands and his feet." Jesus says to the Apostles: what I want you to do is to preach a message about "the changing of your mind and the cancellation of your sins ... among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." 'And when the inspiration of the Holy Spirit comes upon you, he will be my third and final witness.'

The interaction that Christ is having with his Apostles, of course, goes far beyond the Apostles. *Because they became his witnesses, he is now having an interaction with us.* Right now. At this moment. It is as if God is saying: during this next forty day period, I want you to be thinking about what my Son has been saying to you - both by his life and by his death. And now, by his resurrection. Until his ascension, where you will see him no more, *hear him*. And if you do, you will have my three witnesses in yourselves - the water, the blood, and the Spirit. - Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Joh 20:27