

Numbers 21: 4-9
Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2: 1-10
St. John 3: 14-21

Lent IV 2024.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.”
Ephesians 2: 8

Perhaps you have had an experience somewhat like this: When I was a little boy, I received a birthday present from my father. It was a race track set!... It just needed to be assembled; and the little electric cars had to be assembled. When it was all to be put together, the little cars would race in an approximate figure-8 formation. There was only *one* problem! After I excitedly opened the box, the instruction manual was entirely in the German language. My father couldn't read German. I couldn't read German (and still can't). Disappointment and confusion... I couldn't bear the idea of packing up the box and returning it to the toy store – the prize was right before my eyes!... Besides, how hard could it be to assemble a child's toy?... How hard could it be?...

Well, the task turned out to be much harder to complete than either a clumsy father or an enthusiastic little boy realized! There were a number of false starts; little screws would roll away; brittle little pieces of plastic snapped; and so on. Most of the problem, I recall, is that we didn't know *which order* to assemble the product, and that was the key to success... The order was important, and we often got it mixed up... Eventually we got the order of assembly right, and sheer joy followed!...

That childhood memory came back as I pondered today's second reading, from Ephesians. Paul is writing about faith and outward behaviour. For Paul – and I suggest, for the whole Christian Church – getting the order correct is absolutely vital...

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians has 6 chapters, which split into 2 parts: Chapters 1-3 tell about the big story of God's saving work... The second part, chapters 4-6, contain a lot of practical advice about the Christian life...

Today's verses open with the big story: In varying degrees, we have all been disobedient to God's best. Sin has a kind of addictive quality, and that ultimately leads to spiritual death:

You were **dead through the trespasses and sins** in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are **disobedient**. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and **we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else...**

We've been disobedient... There's a certain deadness to trying to get along without God... Let's notice that everyone is included – every single human being. It's the way members of the Ephesian congregation used to be; the way all Christians *used* to be. (“We were by nature children of wrath, like everyone [everyone!] else.”)

It doesn't sound good, does it? In fact, it's disastrous! That's the universal human problem – we have a universal tendency to mess up our relationships with God and with others, sooner or later. Sin can't mix with our perfect, loving God... So, that's the problem...

Then St. Paul moves from the problem, to the solution... God offers salvation to all people, through the perfect work of Jesus Christ. God has made us “alive, together with Christ...” God's Spirit gives us new life.

Verse 4 continues, “But God, who is **rich in mercy**, out of the **great love** with which he loved us...” Let's notice the qualities of God: Merciful; and greatly loving...

“even when we were **dead** through our trespasses,” – sin leads to death – “[God has] made us alive together with Christ— **by grace you have been saved**— and **raised us up** with him.” God has made us spiritually alive through Christ, and we are raised up. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. We share in this new life.

One great and glorious Day, when our Lord comes again to be our Judge, we will share in the resurrection to eternal life, with spiritual bodies in heaven... We were dead. Jesus Christ saved us. We are raised up in new life... And, let's noticed we have been saved “by grace” – by God's stunning love, generosity and help, poured into our lives... We don't deserve it. We can't earn it. It is a gift. (The NIV translation in our pews sometimes makes the emphasis that it's a “free” gift to us.) Jesus Christ paid the price. We get the gift which never ends – eternal life...

Paul packs the whole Christian story – the gospel – into a few short phrases. God saves us. We receive the gift of forgiveness and perfect life which never ends, through by God's grace...

We learn to open our hearts to the free gift of God's grace by faith. Verse 8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith...”

Now, some people who are new to the Church might think, “Great! I'm done!... I've been baptized. I am adopted into God's spiritual family, the Church. God has given me this wonderful gift. I must be all finished!...” Well, actually, no! We're not “done” at baptism. We're not “finished.” Rather, a glorious new chapter is beginning... Afterwards, we're called to live *in response to this gift*. Once again, Ephesians 2:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

We don't boast about all the good stuff we do. But we have been created in Christ Jesus to do *good works* – to live beautifully for God, to build up his Church and his kingdom...

The catholic faith – that is, the universal Christian faith – is that we're to *do beautiful stuff for God* – in response to what God has done for us in Jesus...

One of the things we do for God is just what we're doing this morning – worship. God doesn't *need* our worship. God doesn't need anything. But we're learning his ways together, and we're learning to respond together with joy and gratitude...

We're called to worship... As well, we're called to bring about the values of heaven to the world around us. I am so proud of what I see so many in this congregation doing! (and no doubt, other people are doing stuff that I don't know about!): Whether it's the Food Bank or the Teen Lunch Program or the Take Home Meals; whether it's supporting the orphanage or driving for the Cancer Society or supporting the pregnancy centre or whatever – done in the right humble spirit, this delights God's heart... We do beautiful stuff for God and others...

Wait, there's more: We have the enormous privilege, to introduce broken people to a friend who will never leave them – Jesus himself. We can invite others into this amazing pilgrimage of faith...

We contribute to the ministry of the Church, by offering our talents and money and time generously, according to our abilities... We can all pray. We take in the scriptures and our devotions; we share in the sacraments, and so on... The point is, after receiving the gift of faith, we're called to *do wonderful stuff for God and for God's broken people*...

St. Paul calls these “good works:” “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works... that we should walk in them...” Years ago, children were sometimes told to “sit still and be good.” Nonsense! We're called to be active in “good works...”

Please let's remember, the order is essential: Remember the struggle I had with that childhood toy, because we weren't assembling it in the right order? The order is all-important: We don't get saved by *doing* good stuff, to try to get on God's good side! None of us – none of us – will ever be good enough... Rather, in light of what Christ has done for each one of us, we do good stuff in response, in gratitude...

I mention this, because some people get mixed up about the proper order. Have you ever heard anyone say something like this? “I’m a pretty good guy [or woman]. Hopefully, I’ll get to heaven...” (I can’t think how many times I’ve heard that.) What the person is saying, is that they want to earn God’s favour the way employees get paid their wages from their employer by their work. Once again: We can’t earn God’s favour... All of us fall short. We don’t do good stuff to try to get on God’s “good side.” Instead, we gratefully accept the gift he offers in Christ, and then do good stuff *in response* to what God has done in each of our lives...

Here’s an illustration which might help: Many of us are familiar with the sacramental rite of Reconciliation (what used to be called, private Confession)... Incidentally, none of us *has* to go to private confession. But if there’s something bothering you, it’s probably a good idea, before Easter Day!...

In some churches which offer Reconciliation, the penitent is expected to offer devotions to God, or some other action, and the assurance of forgiveness is tied to the action... For Anglican Christians, the order is a little different. Typically, I or another priest (or in some circumstances, a lay person) will talk with the penitent. (There might be some relationships which need to be mended, for instance, and we need to reach out.) But then a prayer of confession and forgiveness is offered, without reservation... Forgiveness isn’t tied to stuff we have to *do*. We are absolutely, unconditionally, forgiven... The point the Anglican teachers are making is that we receive God’s gift, and live in response to it. We want to avoid the impression that we are doing stuff, and that it’s by being pretty nice that we are receiving forgiveness and love...

Thanks be to God for his amazing, unending grace, shown supremely through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Let’s do good stuff for God, not to try to earn points in God’s good books, but in gratitude, joy and peace for all he has done, is doing, and will do, for us.

Amen.