

“WHY BELIEVE? II - THE PAST IS THE PAST”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Mother's Day
Festival of the Christian Home

Acts 9:1-20

John 21:15-19

Today, as we all know is Mother's Day. I hope all of you who are mothers are going to be spoiled today. I know some of you already have been because your children are here with you in worship today. And I suspect others of you will be as the day goes on - you might even get some flowers or gifts or even get taken out to dinner, or have dinner made for you. Enjoy every minute of it!

I want to tell you about one mother and her Mother's Day experience. She had three sons, and each of them had been fabulously successful in their careers. They were pretty competitive, so when it came to gifts for her for Mother's Day they did their level best to outdo the others. Her eldest son told his brothers, "I've built Mom a great big beautiful new house!" The middle son said, "That's nothing, "I just bought her a top of the line Mercedes with every possible amenity - GPS, bluetooth, rear camera, 10 CD player, why it even can parallel park itself!"

Well, not to be outdone, the youngest son says, "Nice try, you guys. I did better than both of you put together. You know how Mom enjoys the Bible, and how she can't see very well anymore. Well, I sent her a parrot that can recite the entire Bible. It took 20 monks in a monastery 12 years to teach him. I had to pledge to contribute \$10,000 for 10 years, but it is worth it. Mom just has to name the chapter and verse, and the parrot will recite it!"

Not long after that, their mother sent each of them a thank you note. She wrote to her first son - "Michael, thanks for the house, but it is too large. I live in only one room, but I have to clean the whole thing!" To her second son, she wrote: "Marvin, the car is lovely, but I'm nearly blind so I can't drive. I stay home all the time, so I never use the Mercedes."

Finally, to her youngest, she wrote this: "Dearest Melvin, you were the only son to have the good sense to know what your mother likes. That chicken was delicious!"
(On-line, Sermon Illustrations by Kent Crockett)

That really didn't have anything to do with my sermon - that was just my Mother's Day gift to all of you!

Well, on to more important things. One day, in an elementary school classroom a teacher presented a lesson to her students about magnets. The next day, she gave them a pop quiz, and on it was this question: "My full name has six letters. The first one is m. I pick up things. What am I?" When the test papers were turned in, she was astonished to find that almost 50% of the students answered the question with the word mother!

Ah, truer words were never spoken.

Well, in a different, but maybe not so different way, both of today's scripture lessons are about something being picked up and put away - and that something is sin. The one picking it up is the Lord, and the beneficiaries of it are two very famous Biblical figures - Peter and Paul.

Let's revisit their stories. Peter, as you know, was not only one of Jesus' twelve disciples, he was one of the inner circle - Peter, James and John. Peter was, for all intents and purposes, Jesus' right hand man. He had turned over his life to follow Jesus - left his career, left his home, and followed wherever Jesus led. He watched Jesus do incredible things, and at times, he challenged Jesus, and Jesus challenged him. They were incredibly close.

But at a time when Jesus needed his love and loyalty the most, Peter failed him. In a courtyard, on the night on which Jesus was arrested, Peter denied even knowing him - and he did it three times. Of all people to turn on Jesus, Peter was the last one you would suspect. And yet, he did.

Now, it's days after Jesus has risen from death, and He appears to the disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples have been fishing. They have come in from their boats and had breakfast with Jesus, and then he turns his attention solely to Peter.

It's hard to imagine what Peter is feeling. I would think it would be hard for him to even make eye contact with Jesus - so burdened with guilt was he over his failure to admit being His follower. Oh, how easy, and how understandable it would have been for Jesus to lash out at Peter. But, as one writer put it so beautifully, "As Jesus sat on the shore of Galilee and looked into Peter's eyes, he did not see an evil man; He saw a weak human being who desperately needed a second chance. And so he forgave him and restored him in a very gentle way."

(On-line, "The Miracle of Forgiveness," Michael T. Parker)

Today's Epistle lesson shows us another weak human being - Paul, who we now know as the greatest evangelist Christianity has ever known. But when we first encounter him in this morning's lesson he is the greatest persecutor

Christianity had ever known. His mission in life was to crush the Christians, crush their spirit, drive them away. He was zealous about it.

And then, one day, as he was making His way on the road to Damascus, a bolt of light came down out of heaven, and he heard the voice of Jesus, who confronted him on his sinful ways, and touched his soul in such a way that he was changed forever. He put behind his sinful ways, and picked up the mantle of faithful discipleship and went forth from that day to tell anyone who would listen about the saving love of Jesus Christ, the love that went to the cross to “pick up his sin” if you will, to pay the price for his sin, to give him the chance to begin again and to be set free.

I remind you this morning that the title of this sermon series is “Why Believe?” Well, the answer that is well evident in these two stories is this: Because when you believe, when you accept Jesus as the Lord and Savior of your life, your sins are forgiven, you are set free, and the past is the past.

The scriptures are filled with stories of the God who lets the past be the past. Even from the beginning, from the Hebrew scriptures, we see it with Adam and Eve, who even though they are punished for their disobedience, God gives them a second chance; and David, who was given a second chance after his adultery with Bathsheba.

And the Gospels are filled with stories of the past being the past for so many people - Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well, Zaccheus, the list goes on and on. Our God is a God of second chances - who forgives our sins when we confess them, and puts us back on our feet, and gives us new life.

It is astounding to see what forgiveness meant in the lives of these Biblical characters. Peter went on to be the one upon whom Jesus founded His church. On the day of Pentecost, when the people thought these new Christians were crazy or drunk, Peter was the one who stood up and preached, and told how Jesus rose from death, and how He overcame sin and leads sinners to new life. He told his own story.

And Paul regularly, in his preaching and teaching, told about that moment on the road to Damascus, when his sinful self was laid bare, knocked to the ground, and how he got up a new man, deeply in love with the Lord of his life, and deeply committed to leading others to Him.

The woman at the well, after her encounter with Jesus, laid down the burden of her sin, and went forth a new woman, telling everyone she could about Him, and inviting them to meet Him too, and know the joy that she knew, and the freedom of sin laid down.

Why believe? Because you can know love as all of these people did - new life, life freed from the burdened of unconfessed sin, life filled with possibilities and hope, life built on trust in a God who never lets you go - a God so in love with you that He sacrificed His Son to pay the price of your sin, to buy your freedom. A God so in love with you that He wants you to know abundant and eternal life.

The invitation today for you, for me, for all of us, is to lay down the burden of our sins, to give them up to God, that He might forgive us and set us free. If you feel like you can't do that, that you're not worthy, remember those words about Jesus' encounter with Peter, how He didn't hate him and didn't look upon him as an evil man, but a weak man in need of His help. That's how He looks at you and me, as feeble and frail human beings, as sinners standing in the need of grace. And He waits to give it to us, if we'll but ask.

You know, Jesus once described God as a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings. What a beautiful portrait of how God loves us - always seeking to care for us, keep us safe, do what is best for us. That includes inviting us to the freedom of an unburdened life, a life freed of the sins of the past.

Writer Max Lucado, in his book *3:16 - The Numbers of Hope*, tells how one day he decided to screw up his courage and repel down a fifty-foot cliff. He was in Colorado with some friends, and they convinced him to do it. They told him what a thrill it would be for him, even though he was scared to death.

So he got to the site, and he talked to the woman in charge. "Ever done this before?" she asked. "No," he replied. She handed him a leather harness and told him to step into it. "What about you?" he asked. "Have you lowered anyone down the mountain?" "Been working here all summer," she beamed.

"It's simple," she continued. "Hold the rope and jump. Bounce off the wall with your feet." Lucado thought, "Someone make a law: the words *jump*, *bounce* and *wall* should never be spoken in the same breath."

"How do I keep from crashing?" he asked the young woman.

"You don't," she said, "I do that."

"You?"

"Yes," she replied, "I hold your rope."

"But don't I do *something*?" he begged.

“Yea,” she replied, “you trust me.”

(Max Lucado, *John 3:16 - The Numbers of Hope*, p. 75)

Friends, those are the same words our Lord says to us. “I hold your rope. Trust me. I won’t let you fall. Trust me enough to give me your sins, trust me enough to confess, trust me enough to forgive you, trust me enough to put you back on your feet and let you begin again. Trust me enough - I hold your rope.”

Do you? Will you? You don’t have to be burdened by your past anymore. The invitation is there. The decision is your’s. My prayer is that you will trust in the God who loves you more than life, and accept His gift of a new beginning for your’s. May it be so.

Amen.