

## Second Sunday in Lent

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Lenten Reading                      Betty Dennison

\*Hymn 450    Be Thou My Vision

Prayer of Confession

**Holy and merciful God, in your presence we confess our failure to be what you created us to be.**

**You alone know how often we have sinned in wandering from your ways, in wasting your gifts, in forgetting your love.**

**By your loving mercy, help us live in your light and abide in your ways, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.**

Hymn 698    Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.

I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ,  
we are forgiven. Amen.

Old Testament Reading              Psalm 121

Moments With Our Young Disciples

New Testament Reading              Luke 13:31-35

Morning Message

“Who do people say that I am?”

That was a loaded question Jesus asked his friends. As we have traveled through the scriptures of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, we learn the importance attached to the name of Jesus.

When he is born, Mary and Joseph call him, “Jesus,” which in Hebrew is “Yehoshua,” because he will save his people from their sins.

Cruden’s Bible Concordance lists 198 names given to Jesus, each one packed with meaning.

Like many of you, I'm sure, we get pictures and videos almost every day of our grandchildren. One of my favorites is of Tad, when he was just a few months old. Sturdy enough to propel himself in his exer-saucer, we hear his father call his name, "Thomas!" and his little round head turns in the direction of the iphone video-ing the moment. A smile forms on his chubby little face. "Thomas!" dad calls again, and the smile grows. "Is your name Thomas?" and his little body just starts to bounce for all its worth, his bright eyes locked onto his dad's in this grand moment of recognition.

Our names are important. Your name is important. If I hear your name, I am immediately on alert, asking questions, like, are you in the hospital? Should I give you a call?

It is with this kind of attention that I read the paper. One night last winter, I settled in with a cup of tea and the Herald-Dispatch. As I turned to the obituaries, I noticed the name of a dear friend, Robert, and shook my head in disbelief. Surely this couldn't be right.

While our kids were still at home, we saw Robert and his wife regularly. But we saw less of each other now that our nests had emptied. In recent years, Robert and his wife had moved to Ohio to be closer to their daughter and her family. We understand that, don't we?

The funeral home visitation was that night, so I rushed upstairs and got myself put together enough to make a visit. I tried to reach Ed while I drove. He was at a music conference out of town with students. I knew this news would hit him hard. I finally reached him as I was walking into the funeral home. I could hear the grief and disbelief in his voice. I detected a note of guilt that we had lost contact with this couple. I was feeling it, too.

When we confess our sins each week in worship, we ask God to forgive us the wrongs we have done and those things we have failed to do. I was feeling the full awful truth of that in those moments.

I waited behind a long line of friends, neighbors, and colleagues to speak to the family. Then I was wrapped in a warm embrace that closed the gap that absence and neglect had created. I started to apologize to Rachel that I was so completely out of the loop and so sad about her husband's death. She gave me one of those looks that said, "You need to hear the rest of the story."

And so I did. I learned that for nearly the whole time they had lived in Ohio, her husband had been battling a brain tumor. He underwent surgery and radiation treatment to no avail. He suffered two massive strokes. The illness devastated his body and his mind. For his loved ones,

his death was a blessing. His suffering and theirs, had ended. He had been received into the mercy and everlasting arms of God.

My friend described their lives as being consumed by Robert's illness. There was no time for much of anything else. The pastor and members of the church they had joined were very supportive and helpful, present with them through the whole ordeal, just as their friends here would have been.

And then she said, "I want to tell you something. You will understand."

One Sunday, she explained, "Our pastor spoke about finding our purpose. And I spent a good deal of time thinking about that. What is my purpose? What is Richard's purpose?"

Now, I would have said she had found her purpose in being a devoted daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, and for more than thirty years, an outstanding teacher. And her husband's purpose could be found in much the same way through his family connections, and as a mechanical engineer. They were both valuable community members and faithful Christians. That's a lot of purpose in my estimation.

As she was contemplating the question about purpose, she went to the facility where Richard was a patient and found herself at the nurses' station. She said she hadn't planned it, but, she heard herself ask if they had ever thought of holding a worship service there. The nurse said no, but, sounding interested, asked Rachel if she knew of a church that might be approached.

Rachel said she pointed out the window. "See that church across the field? I go to that church. I'll ask the pastor about it. The next Sunday, a worship service was held for patients, family, and staff. And from one spontaneous inquiry, a relationship was born and has grown beyond a single worship service.

She said that was confirmation that she and her husband were exactly where they were supposed to be. Their lives still had purpose. Robert's very altered life still had purpose. In fact, they had a fresh purpose, even at 70 years of age.

Why do I tell you this story? After all, you heard it last year during Lent. Because the kingdom of heaven and eternal life are gifts of God and we don't have to wait til life on the other side to appreciate their benefit. They may be enjoyed now. Today.

Nicodemus asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life, how he could be born again. Surely, he couldn't literally be birthed from his mother's body again.

That is a powerful, blunt question. It strikes at the heart of the matter. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, one of the most devout Jews of his day. He was one of the most highly educated people of his community. He was important, respected. His life had purpose.

It was nighttime when Nicodemus sought Jesus out. It was believed that the most serious, most dedicated study was undertaken at night. So, here he was, a faithful Jew, a law scholar, asking Jesus about life after death.

What does our reformed tradition tell us about life after death?

We start with what we know of Jesus' experience. The Jesus story is our story, too. We will follow him. Through the witness of Scripture and our confessions it is understood that we are destined, when we die, to follow Jesus into God's presence.

In Second Corinthians 5:8 we read these comforting words:

"We do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." Sometimes we interpret that verse as "absent from the body, present with the Lord."

We also take counsel from our confessions. The Scots Confession declares, "The chosen departed are in peace, and rest from their labors, not that they sleep and are lost in oblivion as some fanatics hold, for they are delivered from all their fear and torment, and all the temptations to which we and all God's chosen are subject in this life."

Westminster is even more precise, declaring that "the bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God." Of course, we would amend that to include women.

And the verse I read at every funeral service : "If we are buried (in baptism) with Jesus in a death like his, we will also be raised in a resurrection like his. Romans 6:5.

If there is a Presbyterian narrative about life after death, this is it: When we die, our souls, or spirits, go to be with God, where we enjoy God's glory and wait in anticipation for the promised day of the kingdom fully revealed.

Say this with me: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

This is the gospel in a nutshell, isn't it? It is the most-often quoted verse in the Bible. And this was the ultimate answer to the deep and probing questions Nicodemus brought to Jesus.

That verse announces that the story of our salvation begins with God and God's love. God initiates a relationship with us out of love. God sent his Son to live among us, to be one of us, to close the gap between God and ourselves, to save us. Behind everything is the love of God.

In the Letter of First John we read, "God is love. Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

This is not the image of God to which some cling. Some Christians cling in fear to the image of God as judge and monarch whose subjects adhere to a strict code of conduct in order to please him.

But the God Jesus describes that night to Nicodemus, is the Father whose greatest desire is to have all his children home.

Augustine said, "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us to love."

And that is the essence of what my long-time friend shared with me that night at the funeral home. God had loved them in West Virginia. God loved them in Ohio. God loved them in the hospital, and God loved them in the nursing home. And God loved them so much that the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ shone through their suffering, to bring comfort and courage to others of similar need.

And if that was the purpose at the end of Robert's life, then God's kingdom did come.

\*Affirmation of Faith            The Apostles' Creed p. 35

\*Hymn 580 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Intercessions for Lent

Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom.

As we journey with you toward Jerusalem, may we be aware of both crises and opportunities in this life of discipleship. Increase in us our capacity to empathize, to work for peace, to forgive as you have forgiven us.

Hear now our prayers for the world, our neighbors, and ourselves:

**For your church around the world, we ask for new life.**

**For all who carry out ministries in your church, we ask grace and wisdom.**

**For those who have accepted the spiritual disciplines of Lent, we ask inspired discipleship.**

**For Christians of every land, we ask unity in your name.**

**For Jews and Muslims and people of other faiths, we ask your divine blessing.**

**For those who cannot believe, we ask your faithful love.**

**For governors and rulers of every land, we ask your sober guidance.**

**For people who suffer and sorrow, especially your sons and daughters in Ukraine, Syria, and Turkey, we ask your healing peace.**

**Holy God,**

Your Word, Jesus Christ, spoke peace to a sinful world  
and brought humanity the gift of reconciliation,  
by the suffering he endured.

**Teach those who bear his name to follow the example he gave us.**

**May our faith, hope, and charity**

**turn hatred into love, conflict to peace, and death to eternal life.**

**We lift our prayers to you now for the health and well-being of our church members, families, and friends in their particular circumstances. *Silence.***

**Save us from weariness, but, strengthen us to seek health and wholeness for all people, here and everywhere.**

**We lift our prayers with the confidence of the children and God, saying, Our Father...Amen.**

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

\*Hymn 607 Doxology

\*Prayer of Dedication

**Blessed are you, O God, giver of all things. Through your goodness, we have these gifts to share.**

**Use us and what we have gathered, in serving the world with your love and compassion, through the one who gave himself for us,**

**Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.**

\*Hymn 725 O, Jesus, I Have Promised

\*Blessing

Go now, and live before God in openness and integrity.

Set your minds on the ways of God,

not clinging to your own life,

but taking up your cross to follow Jesus.

And may God give you a share in the eternal covenant;

may you be found faithful when Christ comes again in glory;

and may the Holy Spirit strengthen you in faith and courage,

and lead you in the way of righteousness. Amen.

\*Postlude

