

God Says Yes At The Cross
Third in a Series of Three, "God Says Yes"
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 26, 2020
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Isaiah 9 - There will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish...The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

I Cor. 1: I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment...For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

Dear Friends in Christ,

The premise of our three part sermon series is that the rhythm of Christianity is God first of all saying yes to us by sending His Son to be our Savior and then we say yes back to him by repenting of our sins, believing in Jesus as Lord, and serving one another in response. God loves us first, we receive that love, and then we go looking for wounded and lonely people in need of some kindness and patience. Right here in Divine Service, God serves us first of all with the preaching of His Word and his very body and blood at the communion rail, we are served through no merit of our own, and then we go looking for hurting and broken people to serve.

The author Alan Paton told a true story about a South African judge which illustrates this rhythm of Christianity. His book has the title, "Ah But Your Land is Beautiful." *A black pastor invited the judge, Ian Christiaan Oliver, to attend his church on Maundy Thursday. It was during the worst period of apartheid, and the judge knew that he was risking his career if he went. The judge meant to be a good man, so he accepted the invitation. He learned on his arrival that it was a service of footwashing and he was urged to participate. He was called forward to wash the feet of a black woman named Martha Fortuin, who as it happened, had been a servant in the his own house for thirty years. Kneeling at her feet, he was struck by how weary they looked from so many years of serving him. Greatly moved, he held her feet with his gentle hands and kissed them. Martha fell to weeping as did many others in the room. Soon after, the newspapers got word of it and the white man, the Judge lost his political career.*

The author added that although he lost his career, he may well have found his soul. The judge learned what we want to learn again today, that as often as people of all colors and persuasions gather at the foot of the cross, ***there is no more darkness, and there are no divisions. Those are the two lessons of our sermon today, that in Christ, there is no more darkness, and there are no divisions.***

Lesson #1 comes from the Old Testament and Gospel lessons today, that at the cross of Christ, there is no more darkness, That as often as sinners are repenting and believing in

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Jesus Christ as their Savior, that often there is no gloom, the darkness has to flee, and life is changed for the better.

Isaiah predicted that when the Messiah arrived, he would arrive as a child. And that by the time this Child had grown into a man and finished the work he came to do, there would be no more gloom, even the Gentiles who had been walking in darkness will have seen a great light, and those who had been dwelling in a land of deep darkness, on them light would shine.

Jesus verified in today's Gospel that he was and is the light of the world, and that darkness doesn't have a prayer against Him. He quotes Isaiah word for word on the subject of a great light shining into the region of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way beyond the Jordan. As soon as he hears that John had been arrested, he withdrew to the land of Galilee. He does his first miracle in Cana and adopts the city of Capernaum as his new hometown and base of operations. The significance of Jesus beginning his ministry of preaching and teaching and doing miracles in Galilee is that Galilee included not only Jews but all kinds of Gentiles in the mix. The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were often in the pathway of invading armies,, and so it was they had much in common with the nation of Israel in Isaiah's day - the doom and the gloom were overwhelming, the future seemed hopeless, and darkness was everywhere.

Matthew records the beginning of Jesus' ministry in this way, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus was preaching exactly what John the Baptism was preaching, which was exactly what every true Old Testament prophet was preaching, which is exactly what Christian pastors are called to preach in these end times.

Dear friends in Christ, such Good News we celebrate one more time in this Epiphany season, this season of lights. Wherever there is repentance, there is the forgiveness of sins, and wherever there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and there is light. Which is why this very day I invite you to bring every bit of gloom, every bit of distress, every bit of spiritual darkness that may be terrorizing your soul, bring it to the foot of the cross and listen as Jesus Christ will say to you one more time, "yes, here is a light at the end of every one of your tunnels." This very day, bring every one of your flaws, your failures, your faults and your foibles to the foot of your Savior's cross, where He will say to you one more time, "Yes, Your sins are forgiven, yes, your guilt has been covered, yes, I have prepared a mansion in heaven for you, that where I am you may be also Bring your loneliness and your anxieties and your tiredness to the cross and hear Him say, "Yes, let me hold you close, I am with you always even to the end of the age." Bring your hopelessness and your helplessness and there at the cross hear Jesus cry out "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

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A story is told about a shoplifter who wrote to a department store and said, "I've just become a Christian, and I can't sleep at night because I feel guilty. So here's \$100. The thief signs his name but then he adds, "If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

True repentance is not about making payments as a way of earning back the favor of God, It's about coming clean, admitting our sins, and crying out for mercy. Repentance isn't about us finding our way back to God, it's about Jesus Christ descending from his throne on high and being the one and only way to be saved. Repentance isn't about pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps in this place, it's about moving away from darkness towards the light on a daily basis. Lesson #1, at the cross of Christ, there is no more gloom, spiritual darkness is on the run.

Lesson #2 comes from today's Epistle Lesson, that at the cross of Christ, there are no divisions. The Corinthian congregation had all kinds of divisions. There was the "we follow Pastor Paul faction," the "we love Apollos faction," the "we want Simon Peter to be our pastor faction," and the "we just want to follow Jesus faction. Paul's answer was the same as it was in all of his letters to first century congregations - it was to simply point them to Christ crucified. It was the name of Jesus, not Paul, into whom they had been baptized. It was Jesus and not a former pastor who had been crucified for them. It was Christ and not a traveling missionary or eloquent preacher that they were to be following.

If you take a sneak peak into the rest of his letters to the Corinthians, you will see that they were a messed up congregation. They were messed up on the subject of sexual immorality, they were messed up on their idea of how communion should be practiced, they were divided on the matter of speaking in tongues in public, they were divided on the subject of marriage and divorce, they were divided on whether or not they could eat meats which had been sacrificed before pagan idols.

If you take a sneak peak into any congregational life over the years, including this one, you'll find all kinds of issues and divisions and factions. In some places, the differences are on important matters of doctrine, in other places, the differences have mainly to do with the pride and stubbornness of pastor and people, and in other places, there is a clash between tradition and innovation, and in still other places, there is a clash between folks who think the pastor is terrific and others who have major disappointments.

Through Paul, the Holy Spirit would teach us today what to do with our differences, whether they be doctrinal or practical or personality driven or all of the above - take them to the cross where our divisions melt away into the background. Our unity is not in our wisdom, it's not in our behavior, it's not in our background, it's in the waters of Holy Baptism, where God said yes to us and delivered into our hearts and minds and souls all that Christ won at the cross.

In Baptism, we are given a unity and told to guard it closely. As often as we accept and listen to and talk with each other as brothers and sisters in the faith, we are swimming in our baptismal waters. As often as we sit still together and listen to God's Word, the Holy Spirit

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has an opportunity to bind us together in a way that is pleasing to God and attractive to those outside the Church. As often as we eat and drink together at the communion rail with believing hearts, that often we celebrate one baptism, one faith, and one church. At the communion rail, there is neither male nor female, neither rich nor poor, neither Democrat nor Republican, neither really bad or not so bad sinners.. Just sinners for whom Christ died. Sinners whose souls have been saved / sins have been forgiven / hearts have been changed / minds have been renewed.

Oh God of new beginnings and second chances, here we are again. That was the opening paragraph in my message at our son's wedding this past Thursday near Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Oh God of new beginnings and second chances, here we are again. For Noah and his bride, this is a second marriage, and as is almost always the case, the first marriages have left behind scars both on the inside and out, they have left behind all kinds of regrets and what ifs. And yet one more family gets to revel in what it means for God to be with us through thick and thin, one more family gets to experience the power of the cross, which in fact is the very power of God to save.

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized church in a medium sized city full of folks who can't really explain the power of the cross, but they believe it. They can't really explain the beauty of confession and absolution, but they believe it. They can't really describe the mystery of Baptism, but they believe it. They can't really pinpoint the beauty of their Lord's Supper, but they believe it.

In closing, I repeat my opening paragraph, The premise of our three part sermon series is that the rhythm of Christianity is God first of all saying yes to us by sending His Son to be our Savior and then we say yes back to him by repenting of our sins, believing in Jesus as Lord, and serving one another in response. God loves us first, we receive that love, and then we go looking for wounded and lonely people in need of some kindness and patience. Right here in Divine Service, God serves us first of all with the preaching of His Word and his very body and blood at the communion rail, we are served through no merit of our own, and then we go looking for hurting and broken people to serve.