

Num 21:4-9; Ps 107; Eph 2:1-10; Jn 3:14-21

4th Sun in Lent – God’s Immeasurable Grace

One of my Bible teachers said, “Death is absolute. You can be ‘good, better, and best’, ‘lovely, lovelier, and loveliest’, but you cannot be ‘dead, deader and deadeast’.” (NT Wright at walkingwithgiants.net) Dead is dead.

We come to this medley of Scripture passages today on the fourth Sunday in the Season of Lent – hoping for more basking in warm, sunny days and less shivering in the cold rain of the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps you have challenges other than the weather facing you this week. You would object if I told you that you had been dead, or that you are dead in your trespasses. The Apostle Paul makes clear that everybody – Jew, Gentile, young, old, rich or poor – has been lifted up out of the grave by the power of God’s grace in the resurrected Christ when they trust Him. Immeasurable, unbounded grace freely given to those who allow the Spirit of God to enliven them, and the blood of Christ to cleanse them.

Bear with me. The verses of Ephesians we have been assigned seem to be only half a passage. It begins in the first chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians at verse 15 – and extends to the end of what has just been read aloud. Ephesians 1:15-23 (NASB):

¹⁵ “For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which *exists* among you and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of *you* in my prayers;¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸ *I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. *These are* in accordance with the working of the strength of His might ²⁰ which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to

come. ²² And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

Then Paul goes on to describe how dead we used to be! Absolutely dead in our sins.

There are two distinct paths: following the ruler of the power of the air or following the only begotten Son of God. One way leads to destruction and darkness. The other way leads to living in the light of Christ’s kingdom.

We all come to various forks and turns in the road. Temptations are always there in the journey. But, looking to Jesus helps us through our trials. Those of us journeying without Jesus have no sense of moral testing. The prince of darkness keeps us semi-conscious – even desensitized – in our moral being. It requires the power of God’s grace for us to awaken to exactly who Jesus was and is and will be. This comes about by the power of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. We are awakened like Nicodemus that night he went to visit Jesus.

Almost forty years ago, Bob Dylan wrote the song *Slow Train Coming*. The first verse says:

*Sometimes I feel so low-down and disgusted
Can't help but wonder what's happenin' to my
companions*

Are they lost or are they found

*Have they counted the cost it'll take to bring
down*

*All their earthly principles they're gonna have to
abandon?*

*There's a slow, slow train comin' up around the
bend*

Dylan is a troubadour. A kind of hippie bard – the Shakespeare of Greenwich Village. He writes in huge, mythic figures. He's never been afraid to tell the truth about the world's injustice. He is controversial – he's been a Jew, he's been a Christian. He says he reads his Bible.

I am quoting one verse of one old song, but Bob Dylan's take on "abandoning earthly principles" as the train comes around the bend is right on. God does not seem to be in a big hurry. The kingdom train is rolling our way. And, boarding the train means we have left behind – that we have died to – worldly ways and all the lusts the

Apostle Paul describes here in his letter to the Ephesians.

The children of Israel had multiplied in Egypt. They had a man in the royal court of Pharaoh – so they got special favor from the government. They lived in the land of Goshen. They actually kept the flocks of Pharaoh – they prospered. There was plenty. Then, Joseph passed away. Political winds shifted. They found themselves with no advocate before the new pharaohs. They slipped into slavery and oppression.

By a dramatic, supernatural series of plagues, the Lord sprung His people out of their slavery. They started off into the Sinai Desert. God provided manna, the bread of heaven. He supplied water from the rock. But, the people complained that there wasn't any food or water. Grace was being showered upon them, but they did not see it. So, God decided to send real testing. Poisonous snakes converged on the Israelite camp. People were dying of snake bite. The realization dawned: "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." Then, God did a very unusual thing. He commanded Moses to

make the bronze image of a snake and to lift it high, so the people could see it. God gave this image power to protect and heal His people. Here was grace in a measure far greater than the sin the people had committed. So, moving from maybe the 15th c. BC to the 1st c. AD – we see the Pharisee Nicodemus visiting Rabbi Jesus at night.

The learned Nick isn't getting what Jesus is trying to teach him about being born again. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." (v 3) Then, Jesus reminds him about Moses lifting the snake up in the desert to save his people.

Later, after Jesus' trial, condemnation, beating and sentence of death – Nicodemus will be able to see Jesus – lifted up on the cross of sacrifice.
*On a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross
The emblem of suffering and shame
And I love that old cross
where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain. (UMH # 504)
Wondrous, immeasurable grace freely given!*

Amen.