

“But God”

Ephesians 2:1-10

Fourth Sunday in Lent-B, March 15, 2015

“What does the future hold for me?” “What will the future bring to me?”

I am sure that these two very important questions are **no doubt questions that some of our young friends** today, from the **Lutheran High School Choir, Indianapolis**, are asking from time to time!

What does the future hold for me? What will the future bring to me? Yet, these are not only questions that young people ponder, but questions that we ponder all throughout our lives, maybe even more so near the end of our lives than at the beginning! Well thankfully, I recently read that a growing number of Americans **are beginning to answer these questions in a much more positive way than they did back in 2007 and 2008** when a **big economic recession jolted our whole nation!** It was an economic recession caused in large part by a **gigantic collapse of the housing market**, we were told, by so many lending institutions making loans to people who really were not qualified to receive those loans.

What does the future hold for me? What will the future bring to me?

Technological advances made in recent decades help to answer some of these questions for us!

Take for example, **married couples** today that are **anxiously awaiting the birth of their first child!** They no longer are **surprised** by the **sex of their child** on the day that he or she is born. No longer do they exclaim spontaneously: **“It’s a boy!”** Or **“Just what we wanted; a girl!”** For now the **sex of their firstborn child** is revealed to them by a **sonogram months in advance**, so that they even know **what color to paint the nursery** at the beginning of the **second trimester!**

For many of us in this room, **there was a time when the telephone would ring** and we would ask ourselves, **“I wonder who that is?”** But now the **Caller ID supplies us with that information ahead of time too.** And if you still have one of those **rather-outdated, dinosaurian “landlines”** in your home, you may even see on your television screen when the telephone rings, that it’s your boss who is calling you! Therefore you quickly call out to everyone else in your home: **“Don’t answer that phone!”**

But even taking into our consideration all of these great technological advances, in a moment of real honesty, we must still be willing to face up to the harsh reality that we really only have a very limited amount of control, really, concerning our future! Therefore, for many people, the future is and always will be for them a very trembling, wild and worrywart of a mystery!

Does God bless our hard work and determined efforts with good things that may happen in our lives?

Certainly, to a large degree he does; especially when we assume for ourselves the posture of the psalmist who says: ***“Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands. ² Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing. ³ Know ye that the LORD, he is God! It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves! We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture!”***

But you see, brothers and sisters, this is precisely the problem, because it is not until we are given a second birth into the kingdom of God through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, that any of us would ever assume this posture toward our Creator. For the way that we are born into this world, **though we may be physically alive, is spiritually dead!** The **LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS** remind us that **we have no natural, “holy impulses” in our hearts** towards God, **until he comes to awaken us out of our spiritual death and to fill us with new life; the forgiveness of sins and the gift of God’s salvation.**

Isn't this the very conversation that **Jesus had just had with Nicodemus** where we meet him in our Gospel lesson this morning? Nicodemus came to our Lord one night with some very pressing questions he had in his mind regarding the true identity of our Lord! **"Rabbi we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him!" (John 3:2).**

And what does Jesus do? He cuts straight to the chase: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God!" (John 3:3)**

But these words of Jesus only seem to puzzle and confuse Nicodemus all the more!

"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, **"Truly, truly, I say to you unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. For that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit!"**

When St. Paul begins our epistle lesson this morning with his death-nail proclamation, he is simply paraphrasing these very words of Jesus that were first given to Nicodemus. **"Truly, truly, I say to you unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."**

When **St. Paul writes his obituary over our natural spiritual condition in the first three verses of our epistle lesson this morning**, his description is very bleak. Here Paul is writing to many believers, who did not become believers until they were well into their adult lives: **"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind!" (Ephesians 2:1-3)**

This **awful sounding obituary** with regard to our natural **spiritual condition is not unlike another obituary that recently appeared in a Los Angeles newspaper**, written by the deceased woman's adult children who were filled it seems, with **nothing more than contempt for their mother**, a woman named **Dolores**. Listen to the obituary they posted in the newspaper: "Our mother Dolores had no hobbies, made no contribution of any kind to society and rarely shared a kind word or did a kind deed for anyone in her whole life. Her presence will hardly be missed by anyone and there certainly will be few tears shed by anyone lamenting her passing. There will be no funeral service and no prayers said nor ever any closure for those whom she spent a lifetime tearing apart!"

Friends, **if the shortest verse to be found anywhere in the Bible is only two words** that are recorded for us in **John 11:35, "Jesus wept,"** then I want you to know that the shortest title I have ever given to any sermon I have ever prepared in the past 34 years of my ministry is the **one that appears in our worship folder today;** also only two words: **"But God!"** These words appear **in verse 4** of our epistle lesson today, **"But God!"** These two words remind me of what **Paul Harvey** used to say in his daily commentary to millions of people everywhere on the radio for much of my life. Right there in the middle of his commentary, he's say: **"And now the rest of the story!"** And it is the rest of the story that St. Paul, not Paul Harvey, but the **Apostle Paul now prefaces for us with those two very important words: "But God!"**

Paul uses only two words: **"But God!"** -- **"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus!"**

What does the future hold for us? What will the future bring to us? St. Paul answers these questions for us with no hesitancy at all: ***“So that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus!”***

And yet properly understood this is a present reality for us! Having been made one with Christ, it is not only true that wherever we are Christ is with us, but it is also conversely true that wherever Christ is, there we are with him; already today. Listen to what St. Paul says in **Philippians 3:20: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself!”**

God has now set before us his own bail-out package of enormous proportions. For all of us had racked up a humongous debt with our sins against our God, who is holy; a debt we could never have paid off by ourselves. The amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is his gathering up unto himself our sins, our failures, our pains, our brokenness, our past, our present--to show us already now, by his grace through faith, what the future holds for us!

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing! It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship; created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them!” (Ephesians 2:8-10)

At the end of this worship service today we are going to sing as our **closing hymn** a hymn that Christians in America have repeatedly said in survey after survey is their **“hands down,” all-time favorite!** **“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see!”** And I am sure, no doubt, that many of you have heard the **story behind the hymn whose author whose 18th Century author, John Newton an Englishman, was for many years drafted into service in the Royal Navy.** After his service in the Navy, he became involved in the Atlantic slave trade.

In 1748, a violent storm battered his vessel off the coast of Ireland, so severely that he called out for mercy, a moment that marked his spiritual conversion. Later that night he sat down and wrote the verse of **“Amazing Grace.”** But the full effects of Newton’s conversion would not be manifested immediately. He continued in the slave trade for another 6 years, when he ended his seafaring altogether and began studying much more intently Christian theology. Ordained in the Church of England in 1764, he wrote the additional verses to that hymn; thanking God not only from rescuing him and saving his life from the great peril he had experienced years before this at sea, **but also for saving him personally, from sin, death and the power of Satan, forgiving him all his sins and filling him with the glorious hope of eternal life.**

What does the future hold for me? What will the future bring to me? John Newton answers these great questions for himself and for all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ when he writes: ***“When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining like the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’d first begun!”***

1. Why is grace so amazing? First of all, because it is so rare!

The world doesn’t operate by grace, but hopefully seeks to operate with a powerful sense of justice; that is, according to that **old Latin phrase** a ***quid pro quo***, a tit for tat; a “this” for “that!” When you pay so much for something, you then hope to get something of comparable value in return. **This is perhaps the most basic operative principle of this world, which is really the “antithesis” of grace.** Therefore, we don’t see grace being lived out among us very often, and this is what **makes a true manifestation of grace so absolutely amazing!**

Let me say it again: One of the things that makes “grace” so amazing is because it is so rare. Stop and think about all the flowers you may have passed by last spring and

throughout the summer, even well into the fall. **How many of those flowers did you pass by and never even bother to glance in their direction?** Thousands of them, no doubt, and perhaps because when it comes to flowers and their existence upon this earth they are absolutely prolific! **But just suppose, with me a few moments, if you will, that there had never been any kind of flower on this planet. God could easily have created such a planet! But for us, he created all kinds of beautiful flowers that especially seem to be** most appealing, it seems to women, or so men have come to believe!

Then suppose that after all those flowerless years that you have lived out your life in this world, that suddenly, unexpectedly, that somewhere a rose suddenly appeared—absolutely unique and unheard of; never seen before—a flower. People would be lined up for blocks to look at it in person, to a large degree because of its uniqueness. **They would be so amazed. They would be so filled with wonder, with awe, with astonishment! They would be astounded to see such a thing as that beautiful red flower when they had never seen anything but grass and weeds before.**

Well, this world has never seen anything like grace before, until our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ descended from heaven to this earth and brought it into this world! It is amazing, because it is so rare!

2. Why is grace so amazing? Secondly, because it's so undeserved!

Let's say that walking out of your office building this coming Tuesday on your way to the parking lot to get into your car, you notice a beggar sitting there on the sidewalk and you compassionately choose to give him a ten-dollar bill, rather than to simply pass him by with no response being given to this poor beggar by you at all. This is an act of mercy, for sure! That poor beggar didn't do anything to earn that ten-dollar bill from you! And while this may definitely be a good work that grows out of saving faith on your part, it in no way could be counted as an exercise of grace on your part, when we think about the immense magnitude of grace that our God has shown to us in the perfect life, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ!

Grace, to help us understand the fullest nature of grace, would be for you as a man to know full well that it was this poor beggar, who on Wednesday of the previous week had climbed through a window in your home and raped your wife and two daughters; yet when you see him, he repents of his great sins against Almighty God and you and begs your forgiveness. Rather than calling him and reporting him and his whereabouts to the legal authorities, you write him a personal check for \$1,000,000. This would come much closer to the kind of grace that God extends to his penitent people through the word of the cross!

You remember those words we heard from Romans 5 in our epistle lesson two weeks ago!

"While we were still weak at the right time Christ died for us! Why one would hardly die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good man one might dare to die, but God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5: 6-8)!

3. Why is grace so amazing? Thirdly, grace is so amazing because it is so expensive! Most people are impressed when they see something that cost a tremendous amount of money—whether it be the **Taj Mahal or the Hope diamond.** And I have a sneaking suspicion that if we said that diamond was going to be on display in our narthex following this worship service today, that hardly anyone would believe, but in the case that some of them or at least considered it within the realm of human possibilities, they would stop to see it on their way out of this sanctuary this morning!

But even if the **HOPE diamond** was here and on display in our sanctuary this morning, it is not nearly as expensive or precious and costly as the grace of God is, which was purchased at the price of the blood of the Son of God, being spilt out for us on the cross, the blood of the Son of God who is also the Creator of the universe! He died in agony to provide that grace to you and to me and to all people everywhere who will but hear the message, repent of their sins, become baptized and believe on him!

Why is grace so amazing? Because it is so rare, so undeserved and so expensive!

Certainly the members of the Indianapolis Lutheran High School choir are blessed with some magnificent voices, but I want to close my message this morning by sharing with you the true story about a woman named Charlotte Elliot, who was a beautiful lady with a remarkable voice. She lived in a home in London where everyone was a Christian except Charlotte. A famous minister, Caesar Milan, visited her and challenged her to become a Christian like the rest of the members of her family!

She asked the visiting parson: **"How can I, with my many sins, known to a large degree only by me, come to Christ?"** The parson's answer was: **"Just as you are!"** So later that evening she went into her room, knelt down by her bed, and with many tears in her eyes she confessed her sins to Jesus Christ and invited him, as God the Holy Spirit had prompted her to do, into her life. A few hours later she sat down and wrote these words:

"Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me; and that thou bidd'st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Just as I am and waiting not to rid my soul of dark blot, to thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Just as I am though tossed about with many-a conflict, many-a doubt; fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God I come, I come!

Just as I am, poor, wretched blind; sight, riches, healing of the mind, Yea all I need in thee to find, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Just as I, thou wilt receive, Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve; because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of god, I come, I come!

Just as I am; thy love unknown has broken every barrier down; now to be thine, yea, thine alone, O Lamb of God, I come, I come." Amen