

“Our greatest comfort”

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill

Sunday February 21, 2021

Mark 1:9-15 Lent I

1 Peter 3:18-22

Many of you have read, and several of you have studied the Presbyterian statement of faith entitled: “Living Faith”.

It’s a great document, easy to read, but also very helpful in thinking about what we believe.

Part of the section on Baptism reads:

By the power of the Holy Spirit

God acts through Baptism.

It is the sacrament not of what we do

but of what God has done for us in Christ.

7.6.5 Baptism assures us that we belong to God.

In life and in death our greatest comfort is that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.

This morning, I’d like to consider God’s promises made to us, and how it is that we are assured that we belong to our faithful God.

The Psalmist says; “who can ascend to the Lord’s holy hill?”

“The one with clean hands and a pure heart.” (Psalm 24:8-9)

So who of us has clean hands and a pure heart that we could ascend to God?

Most of us don’t have to look too far to see our sin.

Some of you have it pretty together on the outside, but the truth on the inside is something different.

A look by God at our hearts shows how far we are from having clean hands and a pure heart.

Others of us don’t even have it together on the outside.

You've strayed from God, and all you can see is your mistakes, your sin, the mess.

But the good news of the gospel is that we don't have to be able to ascend to God.

It doesn't depend on us, and our getting it right.

In the book of Genesis there is the story about Noah and the flood, and God's promise to all creation.

Most of us understand the God who destroyed the earth with the flood. The world was so overcome with evil that God decided to cleanse the earth and begin again.

We understand a God who wipes out wickedness and evil.

But the God of the rainbow is a little harder to comprehend.

Our God promises to be faithful even when we are faithless.

Our God knows the full extent of human sinfulness, and yet covenants to remember us, and never to destroy the earth with a flood again.

Our God makes a way so that we will have access to him, though we have no way of doing that ourselves.

1 Peter 3 tells us that *"Jesus died the just for the unjust so that he might bring us to God."*

The word "bring us" is *"prosegein"* a word with a rich background to both Jews and Greeks.

The Jewish background to the word has to do with the priests being brought close to God.

Only the priests had close access to God.

A man might enter the court of the Gentiles, or go through the court of Women, some would enter the court of the Israelites, but you would go no further.

Into the court of the Priests you would not be permitted to go, and only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies.

But Jesus brings us to God; Jesus opens the way for all people to enter the closer presence of God.

In the New Testament the word is used 3 other times:

“In Christ we have access to this grace” (Romans 5:2)

“Through Jesus we have access to God the Father.” (Ephesians 2:18)

“Through Jesus we have boldness and access and confidence to come to God the Father.” (Ephesians 3:12)

The Greek background of the word has to do with the person who brought people before the king. His job was to determine who should be admitted into the king’s presence and who should be kept out. He held the keys of access.

It is now Jesus Christ who holds the keys and in him we are all given access to the king of Kings.

We could not ascend the holy hill of God.

So God *descends* to us in the person and work of Jesus.

And this God who descends to us, who brings himself all the way down into the muck and mire of our sin, begins his earthly ministry defeating evil.

Jesus was baptized by the Holy Spirit and immediately he was driven out into the wilderness, into the arms of the tempter.

In Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, we see him confronted by everything the devil could throw at him.

And the Devil was defeated.

Jesus overcame temptation at every turn.

Jesus, from the first moment of his ministry, would not be side tracked, or subverted, or tempted to take any path but God's alone.

It is this Jesus, we trust to guide us when we are tempted, and to deliver us from evil, for the kingdom, the power and the glory are his, and his alone.

Have you been distant from God?

God has made a way for you to come back.

You don't have to go the long distance home, all you have to do is turn around.

You don't have to make up for your sin or get yourself sorted, or get things right, all you have to do is turn again and accept that you are loved and forgiven, in Jesus.

Are you struggling?

We have access to the King of kings, we are set free to live into Christ, to delight in his love, to lean into him and to embrace this life that is ours through him.

Our greatest comfort is that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.

Jesus has made this possible for you, for all of us, that we might all come boldly to the throne of grace, and know that we are welcomed by the king. Forever.

Thanks be to God!

Prayer:

Holy God, we turn to you, and we are aware of our sin, all the ways we fall short. But we are also aware that there is one much greater than our sin, Jesus our Saviour. You God are faithful, when we are faithless. You God seek us, even when we turn from you. Help us to lean into Jesus, to delight in the relationship that is ours through him. Help us to extend your gracious invitation to the people around us. Amen.