

“Our Greatest Comforter”
by Rev. Frances Savill
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First Sunday of Lent

Mark 1:9-15

1 Peter 3:18-22

How many of you have read “Living Faith”?

It is a statement of faith by the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

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. God's grace and our response to it are not tied to the moment of Baptism but continue and deepen throughout life. It is a sacrament meant for those who profess their faith and for their children. Together we are the family of God.

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.

In Psalm 24 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?

The Pharisees, who were scrupulous in keeping the law, who would be judged by all as the ones with cleanest hands and purest hearts, were most

criticized by Jesus. Their righteousness was a lot of self-deceptions, and their hearts were far from God.

Most of us don't have to look too far to see our sin. Some of you have it together on the outside, but the truth on the inside is something different. A look by God at our hearts show 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. 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 or we are brought* to God the Father."
(Ephes 2:18)

“Through Jesus we have *boldness and access* and confidence to come to God the Father.” (Eph 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, the Messiah, who holds the keys and in him ***we are all*** given ***access*** to the king of Kings. In Jesus, we are now brought before God.

The words that God speaks over Jesus, - “you are my beloved Son,” are words of relationship and love. Before Jesus did anything, before he taught, before he healed, before he defeated the tempter, from before creation He was and is God’s beloved Son, co-eternal with the Father.

Jesus shares that relationship, that embrace of the Father and the Son, now envelopes us. God speaks over you:

“you are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter.”

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.

We see Jesus free to choose his path, free to embrace God's mission, but also free to reject it. Jesus, from the first moment of his ministry, would not be sidetracked, 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.

The Bible is clear that all that needed to be done for our salvation was done by Jesus. "Christ died once for all."

Our greatest comfort is that we belong to our faithful Saviour. In Jesus' life, death and resurrection, he has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, and when we are in Christ we are made new.

This faithful Saviour Jesus is trustworthy with the whole of our lives. Jesus invites us to do life with Him, every day, to trust Him in the big things, but to trust Him in the day-to-day things.

He invites us to relax into His care and provision, to learn his unforced rhythms of grace every day.

And to be assured that in life and in death, we belong to a faithful Saviour. This is good news for us and for our world.

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. In Jesus we come to you, in Jesus we know that we come before you forgiven, set free, beloved, welcomed at your throne of grace. You God are faithful when we are faithless. You God seek us, even when we turn from you. You God love us and in life and death we belong to you our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. We have good news to share and a new life to live in Jesus' name. Amen.