

Sermon for 10 March 2024 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fourth Sunday in Lent/UMCOR Sunday

Scriptures: Numbers 24:1-9; Psalter (*Insert: Alternate leader and people*): Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

“Love”

As in the third Sunday of Advent, this fourth Sunday of Lent lightens up some and brightens, and we speak more emphatically about love rather than judgment.

The first reading doesn't start out that way, because the Hebrews complain about everything on this escape from Egypt we're always hearing about. The scary landscape, the thirstiness, the tasteless manna (which God gave them when they had no food like they knew), and so God sent poisonous serpents that bit the people and many of them died. But then they were sorry, and said so to Moses, and he appealed to God, and God told him to make a bronze serpent and hold it up for the people to see, and when they looked on it, they were healed. How many times have we discovered wisdom through pain? and honest confession, to ourselves, and others ... and to the depths of our spirits, where God comes close and alive to humankind?

Then the song of the people, the psalter, gives us words to chant and memorize ... as we remember we come from ancestors who didn't read or write, and who used tones and varieties of vocal and hearing abilities, uttered altogether, to communicate and memorize and absorb and practice until they learned them by heart.

Then our message becomes much more modern, and we read the letter of Paul to the church at Ephesus reminding that little gathering just a few years after Jesus lived among them and launched this religion we belong to, this movement we name Christian: “The whole thing is based on love,” Paul says. Jesus is God's gift of love to everybody, and an especial joy to those of us who claim it. We know it's a gift, we didn't earn it: “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.”

Solid stuff. Easy to understand. Tough to practice, as everyone from the youngest to the oldest among us knows ... but practical, life-affirming, and healing.

Then listen to the Gospel ... one of the four life-portraits we use of Jesus from his brief time among humans such as we. Each of the four Gospels comes from a different person or group, as far as we can determine by every kind of modern research. John, the last of the four, written perhaps the last few years of the century Jesus began life among us, is the most expansive of the Gospel writers, or groups of writers. Listen to how our contemporaries, the arrangers of our Lectionary, connect us to all the previous lessons for today, with this choice of Gospel verses: (Read the Gospel here, and have everyone join in John 3:16).

(Then, after my completing the passage for today with verse 21, here me on:)

It's all about love. This is the message of Lent and every other Sunday of the whole Christian Year. Martin Luther, in fact, called every Sunday "a little Easter."

Let us be patient with ourselves for forgetting it so often. Let's delight in the songs and offering-taking and peace-passing, the prayers and silences, the hellos and goodbyes, the phone calls to each other during the week, and the private times we devote to this religion of ours.

I saw a beautiful French movie this week down at the Charles Theatre, called "The Taste of Things." It didn't utter a word of Bible, or any religion ... but for me it spoke of the deepest things we all know: About love, and work ... much of the time no one spoke, and even when they did, it reminded me how much more we chatter than our ancestors did. It was about cooking, cutting up vegetables and raising gardens ... and about love. It's all around us. It comes from within, and it's in all the natural events and, God help us, in all the arguments and battles we pass through every moment of every night and day.

Let us pray.

Dear God, love us some more. Convince us how everything merges into this one thing. You love us, and you teach us how to love you back. Show us we don't even have to argue about whether you do, or whether we can. We don't even have to figure out how you do it. We only have to listen a little more, and pay attention to our heartbeat, and ask a question when things settle down some, and think about what a smile is...

Forgive us plenty ... but teach us that's not the real issue. Come to us ... for it is in our invitation that we grow, and in watching that we heal, and in being yours, heart and soul, that we have life, and have it abundantly.

In Jesus' name we say it: AMEN.