

Lent 4 - Year C 2025
 Church of the Messiah
 The Rev. Emily E. Given

I have said on more than one occasion that the reason I wear a collar so often is that part of my call to ministry is to be a pastor to all whom I meet. (Don't get me wrong, I wear yoga pants just like some of you on my day off!) John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said it best - "the world is my congregation." There are moments to minister at the gas pump, in the grocery store aisle, and even at the train station with my friend Bob. As time goes by, I believe more and more that I have a responsibility to look like a priest and not be a jerk - to rewrite the narrative, to undo some of the pain the church has done over time. To be the "new creation" that Paul speaks of in his second letter to the Corinthians.

I am sure that many preachers are going the route of unpacking the parable from Luke this morning, but I just can't when we are given Paul's message to the early church living in Corinth (if you are need to orient yourself to where that is in the world today, it is Greece between Athens and Sparta). Corinth was a major city, populated with more than 90,000 at the time Paul was writing to them. This was not some tiny outpost, but a center of the known world.

Paul was trying to deal with the growing pains of the early believers, helping them to make the leap from Jesus as the incarnate person of God physically in their midst... to the movement of following the way of Jesus when he was no longer with them on earth. Paul was ministering to the people of Corinth in their very specific context... and trying to stay connected to them remotely through letters. Greece was a culture that looked to many gods to offer help in designated areas of life. Paul was seeking to break that model of what the divine looked like. All that is needed was Jesus, and when they accepted that and truly trusted, they would be made new... When we accept and truly trust, we are made new.

In some ways, we are no different from the beloved ones living in ancient Greece. If we are really honest, we have our own created gods we look to for wisdom and salvation. (God's will a lowercase "g"... wisdom with a small "w" and salvation that does not endure.) We allow competing messages into our hearts and minds—messages that conflict with the ultimate message of Jesus that we are forgiven, loved, and free.

We don't need those gods. To quote the rapper Jack Harlow, "You don't need Givenchy, you need Jesus." We don't need the outside trappings; we need the inner life.

Part of why I feel so strongly about taking all the moments I can to pastor the world is because so many people are doing a poor job of it and using all the benefits of our digital age to spread their messages. When I encounter those who have been hurt by the church, I am astounded by some of the teaching they have been subject to, and I do my best to help them unlearn those messages, even if it just for a moment. I apologize to them that there was a need to walk around believing anything other than God loves them, accepts them... and is always calling them to more - more joy, more life, more love.

And here we are in the midst of Lent, where the message is to simplify..... focus. And more than ever. Be reconciled. To allow ourselves to be made new.

God is always reaching out to us, yearning to be close to us and wanting to put back the pieces that have been broken along the way.

I read an article this week by the pastor and writer John Pavolvitz titled “No, Christians, God is Not in Control,” and if it wasn’t written by him... I would have been tempted to consider it “clickbait” and avoid wasting my time.

When I opened the article, I was struck by the wisdom it contained, which spoke to our reading and culture today.

Pavolvitz writes, “What this means is that saying *God is in control*, while doing little or nothing to alter the planet in any meaningful way is spiritual rebellion. It is a willing abdication of our calling to be *makers of peace* and agents of goodness and bringers of justice here. It expects that God will clean up whatever horrible mess we make—and that our prayers alone will serve as the sole request form.”

He continues, “I don’t believe this is true, and it isn’t Biblical. I don’t believe Jesus spent three years imploring people to love their neighbors as themselves, to feed the poor, to protect the vulnerable, to love our enemies, and to bind up wounds of strangers—if God had already written the script and we’re all just playing the whole thing out in flesh and blood without getting to improvise and change lines.

And this all matters because if we are *indeed* free to choose and be responsible for our choices, and these decisions make tangible ripples in the world—then we had better get to work, Christians.”

When I make my apologies to people who have been hurt, it is mostly a direct line to their witnessing what we call “trash theology” - messages that people have communicated to

them... and most likely to you. Messages that fly in the face of the Gospel and do not speak of the love of God in Jesus.

Don't believe them when they tell you "everything happens for a reason"... or "God won't give you more than you can handle"... that "God has a plan, and this momentary suffering is part of it."

Just in case you are carrying those messages in your heart because you need to in order to get through the day... or someone has shared them with you as an answer to challenging life moments, let me remind you.

They were wrong, and I am so sorry.

Everything does not happen for a reason. Sometimes, the world is terrible, but God is good. God does not give you things that feel equal to your strength. God's nature is not to create struggle in our lives, but I can offer the assurance that God will walk with us in the midst of that struggle.

And most of all. God does not seek for us to suffer in order for us to learn. Jesus taught us that we are part of a different story. A story where God's dream for us is to be new creations. And to continue to try to be new each morning because even a book with the name "Lamentations" communicates that "God's mercy is new every morning because the "steadfast love of God never ceases."

Paul's message was that anyone in Christ is a new creation, and everything that is old will pass away. We don't need to carry the old stuff... the old messages... the old way of being. We are more than that in Jesus' eyes.

And then here is the thing.

We need to do something about it. Not because our relationship with the divine is transactional... but because how can we not want to respond to this invitation to newness? Our call is to be "Ambassadors of Christ"... to become the "righteousness of God"

Not just live in the righteousness of God but BE the righteousness of God.

For each of us, that is different. How can you, in the immediate places where you find yourself, seek to make the world right again? Then move out into the wider world, seeking

to make the world that God loves look more like the love God calls us to. Because Paul was pretty clear - it happens through us.

Our newness creates more newness. And through us, God will be praised and Jesus will be made known. Don't be afraid to make him known. It could be the key to someone else seeing themselves as their own beautiful, worthy, and blessed new creation, too.

Amen.