

**Bishop Daniel Richard sermon at The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, South Carolina on March 13, 2022 the Second Sunday of Lent.**

O Lord may the truth be spoken, and the truth be heard, Amen.

Good morning,

Mother Catherine was kind enough to send me your last couple of sermons so that I know what you've been hearing. I just want you to know that she didn't grow up Baptist, so put your seatbelt on. 😊 She has been kindly preaching the gospel to you in succinct form, a burden I have not decided to carry,

So-

One of my favorite stories growing up was like a similar thing that had happened to me. I had a friend who I realized was Roman Catholic, so I was making fun of the Pope, and Jenny's family was Catholic so I loved the story.

A little Catholic boy and a little Baptist boy were friends growing up and finally they learned of each other's religion. The Catholic boy says to the Baptist boy, you should come to church with me- I would love for you to come to church with me. He goes to church with him and the place is dark, filled with incense. The little Baptist boy says, what does that mean?, they go to sit in the pew and little Catholic boy genuflects before the presence of God, boy says what does that mean? They sit down and there's a kneeler in front- Catholic boy pulls it down and kneels, little Baptist boy says what does that mean? He asked questions the whole time. The little Catholic boy had gone to Mary Catherine and studied, and was able to answer all his questions. The little Baptist boy was edified by the day and returned the favor and invited him to his baptism church. Well, if you've ever been to a Baptist church there's not whole lot to explain. You walk in, talk to a few people, and sing 900 songs! The little Catholic boy is feeling bad that he doesn't have any questions to ask. The pastor got up to preach and took off his watch looked at it, and put it down in front of him so he could see. Little Catholic boy says, what does that mean? Little boy says, Nothing! Absolutely nothing! 😊

This morning we have as we sometimes do in Lent, we have 4 obscure texts all of which touch on major things and make you wonder why the lectionary put them all together. I will touch on 2 of them.

One of them is on this idea that we live in a covenant with God. If you were to follow the stories of the scripture from the beginning to the end- it is the story of God's self-revelation to the people of the world through the family of Israel.

This covenant moment w/ Abram is the beginning of its unfolding, one of the most profound covenant texts, but it's so strained that I think it serves as a reminder to us that when we go deep into the heart of God, we cannot expect it to be simple. I think often times, we want faith to be simple or want it to be deeply mysterious, but something that somebody understands. As a bishop, I think that part of my job is to tell you that they gave me all the answers when they laid hands on me and made me a bishop. When you are a priest, they gave you cares as Leviticus says, of the secret things and the mysteries of God.

But the truth is every one of us who goes deep into a covenant relationship with God will find that there is at the heart of the experience, a terrifying darkness.

I really think in the season of Lent to be honest about that, is to begin to say that you are going to go deep in the relationship of God, there is something that is going to have to be shaken loose in you that you can't control.

Look at the story from outside the religious experience aspect of it, Abraham was a killer businessman. I mean he starts out with a few camels and an inheritance of a few dozen sheep in the land of Ur. He goes out to the wilderness and he makes fortunes. Time and time again, he shows that he is willing to make fortunes. He's a good dealer at the gate. There have been treaties written about the business strategies of Abraham. I would commend to you any of them if I thought they were any good. The problem is that Abraham, is also very much a human being. In the picture of his story, we see this love that comes when a covenant is going to be made between God and Abraham. And it is made in this strange way of the severing of these 2 animals. What we know from the period, this kind of covenant mark, this kind of ritual was made that if you were going to make a covenant with someone and you pass through sacrifice like this, the word is that you would be willing to have this same thing done to you if you were to break the covenant. So, if God fails in keeping his side of the argument, then He is willing to die. The keeping of this image is so difficult that the description in the Hebrew scriptures is that Abraham falls asleep and that a terrifying darkness covers him.

And if you have lived long enough to make it out of the youth group in the Episcopal church, which happens around 54. I am still looking for the day. ☺ Then you know that you are going to follow faithfully the way of God. It's often made real to you in the hardest and deepest moments of your life. I did emergency work, I've done

hospital chaplaincy, been a rector for a long time, done middle of the night calls, but for the last few years before I became a bishop I served as a chaplain for the Phoenix Fire Dept.

I met this woman; her house had burned down. It was one of those happenstance meetings. We decided to meet back up in a couple of days. I learned that her husband had been a fire fighter. We went to have coffee. She was in her late 70's and she just had this absolutely wonderful sense of faith. So, when her house burned, I went. She said I would love to talk to you in a few days, I need to get some things squared away. So, we had coffee sitting at a Starbucks. In those chairs that you see all over the country, at those tables that weigh a mysterious amount. I don't know where Starbucks buys their material, some sort of outer space thing, 400lbs at least. It's Phoenix, the sun is out, it is hot. I said to her you have this really confident sense of faith. Where does that come from? My husband became a firefighter when our child was killed in a car crash. I had been going to church for about 2 years. We had started to go to church to try and save our marriage. We were young, things were hard, and she said, I had been going and had been learning to pray and learning to read the Bible, and I wasn't sure that it meant anything, and I definitely wasn't sure that it was helping our marriage. Then, this horrible thing happened. I was sitting in the room and my husband walked in with my Bible study Bible. Just a paperback NIV version, and he said to me, we can get through this, but I don't know how. And he handed me my Bible, and I think he thought I would just know where to find the answers in this paperback NIV. And I asked, did you know where to find them? And she said to me, well I'm no priest, but I opened it to Psalm 23 which is what we had been hearing about the Sunday before. I began to read Psalm 23 to him, and we cried. I began to trust that God would be with us as we walked thru the valley, of the shadow of death. And I sat with her in that little overly sunny corner at Starbucks talking about faith and being married to a firefighter. The table shifted. And I, as a priest, sat at the feet of one who had sat at the feet of the Lord, and I began to ask her for advice.

You see when we go into the covenant, we begin to realize that there is a darkness about the truth that no one of us can contain. As great as Abraham is, a great man of faith, he isn't perfect by any stretch of the imagination. See how he talked about his wife when he was in Egypt. But Abraham was not expected to carry the covenant alone. God carries the covenant for us. We are just supposed to do our part.

The question is what is our part to do in all of us? That is where Jesus' lament over Jerusalem becomes so deeply painful. You see the whole story is that God would love to reveal himself to the world through the people of Israel, and now through us as followers of Jesus grafted in by grace. That was the whole point of Jerusalem. To be

the place where people would come and that they would know the Lord. If you wanted to know God, to speak to God face to face, you would go to Jerusalem as the people had gone to the tabernacle before, as they had gone to the patriarchs before that. You were supposed to be able to go to Jerusalem and know the Lord. But Jerusalem was not revealing God at this point. In fact, it was killing those who were sent to it. So, Jesus' lament is over Jerusalem, but his real lament is for the people who have lost their way.

Now, you and I are supposed to be bearers of the covenant, you know that, right? Mother Catherine you have taught them that, right? ☺ We are supposed to be the new Jerusalem. The church is supposed to reveal God to the world, that is our vocation. That is what it is to be a human being who is fully alive in Christ. You are part of the body of Christ. You are supposed to reveal the presence of God on the earth, so am I. The question is are we doing that, or do we break the heart of Christ all the time? I don't know about you, but I watch the news. The world still needs Jesus, and the church still needs to remember what we are really about. So, this morning, if I could be your bishop for just a moment, and I could give you a way of articulating our faith it would be this- we are supposed to be the people who reveal the God revealed in Jesus. So, you have to remember God. God who is loving, just, generous, and kind. You are going to reveal that kind of God in the world, there is going to be darkness and pain. Because you will discover as you love people that people are not always worthy of the love. But we know that, and we know that in our bones because we know that we are not worthy of God's love. That is not how love works.

Our Christ came to us while we were yet sinners and gave His life for us. So, our job is to love the world even when the world seems unlovable. We are to develop the heart of Christ that says, "O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, how I have longed to gather your children under my wounds like a mother hen". I don't know about you but when I watch the news, and I see the decisions of people I don't often lament, I get self-righteous, I get mad, sometimes I actually fall into hate. We have struggled mightily to maintain the kind of love that would reflect back Christ during the last few years. But here is our faith, every human being was made to be a child of God. Human beings were created to reflect the glory of God in the world. Our job as Christ's people is to see every human being as a child of God. That means babies, and celebrities, and prisoners, and strange people who vote for people we don't like. Even the French. Even the French were made to be a child of God. Lutherans, Episcopalians, Baptists, even Bishops, were made to be the children of God. ☺ And the practice becomes in the world that has fallen among the people that are broken that we would be the people who would behold the children of God every.single.moment.

When the house is on fire and the grave dirt is fresh, and the days are long, and the armies are on the border, can we still hold our faith in the world? The answer is, not alone. And maybe not yesterday, but today we begin again. Today we start over. And so today I would ask you to recommit yourself to being the Jerusalem of the earth. The place where people can know God by being in your presence.

If I could tell you what a church is as your Bishop; a church is a place where people should be able to come and, in a moment, can step into the kingdom of God. A place where they are known and loved from the moment they step in the door. This church is meant to be an embassy of the kingdom of God. In this place we should model what it is to be the people of God in the way that we love people with a generosity that comes from the resources from heaven. With the kind of forgiveness that holds no sin against another person. With the kind of grace that we often see in the south. When we come to this season of Lent, we remember how we have evolved, but we don't stay there. It is time for us as a church to give back the glory of God. To be the Jerusalem that Jerusalem was called to be. As annoying as it is for people who remember the old 1928 prayer book, we do that best in The Peace. When we genuinely hold each other up. When we as St. Paul said "outdo one another in showing honor". When we sing the praises of other people, when we thank others for their work and also when we lift up those who are not able to help, we model back the kingdom.

The reason that gets dark, is because it's hard. There will be times when the covenant is torn out of your flesh. There will be days of darkness when you think you cannot hold on in the midst of the fear. You will discover that a light passes through the sacrifices you have made. When the faith is made new and the heart races.

And since most of our lives are pretty easy, we have Lent. To remind us that a little suffering can strengthen us thru a long journey ahead. So, let us love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves, and start over.

Amen