

## The Love that Sustains Us

We were talking in the Promise Keepers' Men's Group Wednesday night about how a lot of people live their lives virtually in a fog. They are so busy keeping busy that they miss all the really important things going on around them. They often fail to see or meet the relational needs of their children and spouses. They fail to see the glory of God in His creation. They go on day after day preoccupied with work, preoccupied with the stock market, preoccupied with sports, preoccupied with a thousand things that have absolutely no significance to the larger issues of life and eternity. They go on day after day without a thought that someday they will die and have to give an account to their creator.

One of my favorite comic clips has a man falling out a window on the 50th floor of a skyscraper; and, as he passes the 20th floor window on his descent he declares, "So far, so good." I think there are a lot of people living like that. **So far, so good!**

A chief invitation of our Lenten journey is to awaken from the spiritual lethargy and the spiritual slumber that are brought on by the distractions of our worldly pursuits and concerns. It is to come out of the hypnotic trances in which we have come to perceive each day the same as the day before: "same ole,' same ole;" "same stuff, different day." It is the invitation to see with new eyes the new wonders that God is continually creating, a world in which every snowflake is different from every other and every sunset and sunrise are perceived as the miracles they truly are. Revelation 16:15 says, "See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame." Lent is a time to shake ourselves out of our spiritual slumber that the light of Christ can reach us and shine upon us. It is a time to pay attention to God, to the richness of His creation and the priorities of His kingdom. It is a time to wake up.

But the tough part of waking up to the things of the Lord is that waking up means coming to terms with reality. Like the fellow falling past the 20th floor, we too will cling to our delusions as long as we can. Even as Christians we can live very murky lives. Paul puts it this way in Philippians 3:18-19: He says, "For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. (and notice this) Their mind is on earthly things." Waking

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up to the truth means recalibrating our minds, changing our focus from self and self-serving, to God and service to Him. It means dying to ourselves that we might live for Him. Spiritual awakenings are always costly; they require us to give up some of the things we prize the most.

There are four things I want to mention this morning that the rigors of our Lenten journey require us to leave behind. The first thing is our spiritual pride. I shared something quite personal with those who were here last Sunday; I told how God used a great failure in my life to break my pride and to teach me that I cannot serve God in my own strength. Anyone who would be of any use to God needs to learn this lesson. We serve God in the power of God or we don't serve Him at all. Jesus said, "without me you can do nothing." He gave His disciples the great commission to go into the world and preach the gospel to every creature, but He told them not to leave Jerusalem until they were filled with power from on high. God's work requires us to be endowed with divine power. Trying to live for God or serve God in our own strength, by our own will, is always destined to fail. One of the chief discoveries of Lent is our absolute dependency on God. We need to remember that **we cannot do anything worth doing without Him; our "do it ourselves" pride must die.**

The second thing God requires us to leave behind is another facet of this same thing. It is our confidence in the flesh. Some of my experiences over the last several months have brought me face to face with this crucial Lenten theme. For those churches that regularly distribute ashes to their people on Ash Wednesday, one of the statements commonly made to the recipients of the ashes is this: "You are dust and to dust you will return." It is a reminder of their mortality.

This part of my personal Lenten journey actually began sometime last August. Since then I've been plagued with a series of physical attacks and ailments which have driven home to me the frailties of this human body. This is a new experience to me since I am used to being very healthy. I'll be 59 later this month, and I don't have high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, heart disease, or any other serious condition that I know of. I'm overweight but not by a whole lot. I'm in pretty good shape for the shape I'm in. And, really, none of the stuff I've suffered with since August has been particularly life-threatening, but some of it has been rather painful and the touch

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of pneumonia I had last month has left me feeling rather weak and vulnerable even now. It is not as easy as it once was to pretend that I will live in this body forever, which means that I am facing the truth that I am absolutely dependent on God for any long term future I'm going to have. As I said, one of the chief discoveries of Lent is our absolute dependency on God. We are dependent on Him spiritually and physically as well. Psalm 103:13-16 say, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more." Philippians 3:21 says, "He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself." **We are made of dust and to the dust our bodies will return.**

Our Lenten journey invites us to forsake our spiritual pride and our confidence in the flesh. A third thing it invites us to forsake is our confidence in this world. It seems to me that the Lord gives us an interesting take on so-called "global warming." Did you know that global warming is definitely going to happen, and that there is absolutely nothing you or I or anyone else in this world can do to cause it or to prevent it. If you want to hear about global warming, listen to this: II Peter 3:7, 10-13 say:

*By the same word (the word that brought about ("Noah's flood") the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*

It's pretty clear and pretty startling isn't it? **It's all going to burn.** The bottom line is that we cannot take pride in our own will power or spiritual prowess because they won't be enough to

fulfill the purposes of God. We cannot take pride in our physical bodies because they are passing away. We cannot take pride in the world because it is scheduled for destruction by fire.

Pastor Preston from the Mardorf United Methodist Church spoke at the Lenten luncheon this past Wednesday, and he said that the Lenten journey is a journey into “ever deepening gloom.” Well, I think this message has gotten pretty gloomy. But, remember what I said earlier. Lent requires us to face reality. If we want to experience the blessings and power of a spiritual awakening, we have to pay the cost of giving up our delusions. We can’t continue to pretend that in any shape or form we can get along without God. We need to say it out loud that without Him we are utterly desolate and undone. Without Him, without His provision for us in Jesus Christ, there is absolutely no hope whatsoever. Do you understand that? Can you embrace it?

Now, let me tell you the rest of the story. There is one more thing our Lenten journey requires us to forsake and that is our fear. We don’t need to fear the fact that without God’s power we can do nothing. We don’t need to fear death. We don’t need to fear the destruction of the present heavens and earth. Peter touched on this at the end of the passage I read in your hearing. Peter says, “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” Paul touches on it in Philippians 3:20-21, Yes our lives in this world are going to end, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” Nor do we need to fear giving up our self-sufficiency, for as Paul says in Philippians 4:13, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” If we are in Christ we do not have to be afraid.

Speaking of fear, our newest and youngest cat whom we have had for about a year now, is a “scaredy cat.” The truth of the matter is that we wouldn’t hurt him for the world--at least I wouldn’t--and, we have done a lot of things that should have convinced him of that by now. We have fed and watered him faithfully. We leave him out when he wants to go out and open the door for him when he wants to come back in. We’ve bought him treats and toys. I pick him up and pet him once a day on average, but he still doesn’t come to us when we call him and usually runs and hides when he thinks we are coming after him.

And that is the assumption he almost always makes when we are walking in his direction; he thinks we are “coming after him.” What’s interesting is that while he seems to fear us, he has no fear of our big black dog. He crawls all over her. He licks her ears and rubs noses with her. The fact that this dog has killed more than 25 ground hogs doesn’t seem to bother the cat. He feels perfectly safe in her presence, but he is afraid of us.

I don’t know the cat’s earliest history, but I would guess that sometime before he wandered into my daughter’s garage as a stray, he had suffered abuse at the hand of man. He acts like he is suffering from some sort of feline post-traumatic stress syndrome. I believe that love will eventually win out but it’s going to take some time.

Ultimately, our Lenten journey is all about waking up from the slumber of our delusions, facing reality, giving up our fear, and letting God’s love win out in our lives. Our journey takes us to Jesus on the cross, that awesome road sign that is God saying to each of us “I love you this much.” Or, as Paul put in Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Our Scripture lesson from I John 3:1 says, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

We go through the gloomy ground of Lent and make the sacrifices it requires so that we can hear again, or hear for the first time, God saying “I love you.” We make this journey so we can come to Him and be not forbidden, not afraid. We make this journey to understand that our sins have been paid for and cannot separate us from God any longer. We make this journey so we can come to God when He calls us and do what He says when He says it and know that He will never ever harm us when we come under the shelter of His protection.

Perhaps some religious organization or religious leader or life event has traumatized you and made you into a scaredy cat Christian. When God calls you name or moves in your direction you try to get away and hide. I say come, let Him embrace you, melt your fear, and make your heart tender with His love. This Lenten season is a time to risk giving up our fear to let God love us.

# The Fourth Street Church of God

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Sermon for March 4, 2007  
**The Love that Sustains Us**

Philippians 3:17-4:1; I John 3:1-3

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