

**American Lutheran Church of Sun City**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**March 2 – March 3, 2024**  
**Pastor Carl Zimmermann**

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Exodus 20:1-17  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
John 2:13-22 (23-25)

What do doctors, nurses, cops, judges, and schoolteachers all have in common?

According to the Global Trustworthiness Index, all of them are considered more reliable and trustworthy than ordained pastors! Here's another statistic. During the past 50 years, our trust in churches and other religious institutions has declined by 35%. And finally, among Americans, belief and trust in God has dipped to a historic low.

This business of divine dependability is woven into the fabric of our Gospel because the Jewish leaders want to know if Jesus, by word and deed, can be trusted to be the kind of Messiah Israel hopes and expects him to be. We'll explore more of that in a minute but, first, I think we have a desire, a need to trust the people we live, work, play, and worship with.

I recently read a biography of President Lyndon Johnson and he recounted courting his future bride, Lady Bird. He said that the two things he most admired about her were her "dependability" and "trustworthiness." Not the most romantic words you could use to describe your beloved, but we know what the president was getting at. As Shakespeare put it, when suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and taking arms against a sea of trouble, we

want to be surrounded and supported by people we can count on, but that kind of trust doesn't grow on trees.

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How many times have we said to someone: "O, you can trust me with your deepest, darkest secret. I promise not to tell anyone" Only to betray that trust as soon as we can reach our cell phone! Or how often have we been hurt or disappointed when a trusted friend broke a pledge or a promise to us? I don't know the details behind it, but the poet Carl Sandberg said that it was virtually impossible to rely even on his closest friends.

Desperately, we want to trust those we associate with but, even more, without reservation or hesitation we also want to rely on God, but that can be problematic. Even though the national motto of "In God We Trust" is seared onto our hearts we have been taught to first and foremost trust ourselves.

There's nothing necessarily evil or demonic about that but what happens when we are confronted with life's most difficult challenges and discover that we do not possess the personal resources to handle, fix or mend them?

You know what I mean! You're going along minding your own business when out of nowhere you are confronted with the unexpected death of a loved one or a divorce, a financial collapse, or a fractured relationship. At first, you think: "I've been down this path before. I've got some experience and wisdom behind me. This isn't my first rodeo. I have what it takes to handle the

situation” only to discover that you don’t have the time, patience, skills, or ability to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again.

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Brennan Manning was a theologian and author who was also a raging workaholic and alcoholic. His life was a chaotic mess until he went through rehab. He came out “the other side” a different and better person and is probably best known for his book “The Ragamuffin Gospel” which I commend to you. In another book he wrote (and this is a paraphrase): “We need to disabuse ourselves of the notion that Jesus came to make us more moral and ethical. Instead, he came to create a community of believers who would trust LESS in themselves and MORE in the Fire of the Spirit.” For Manning, we do not experience Abundant Life by relying on our energy and enthusiasm but by re-connecting with the Creator, surrendering to the Fire of the Spirit, and following the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Several years ago, my wife and I visited the Timpanogos Cave in Utah. To get to the entrance you first must walk a mile and a half up a steep incline. A park ranger greeted six of us and led us into the mouth of the cavern which was illuminated with small electrical lights. He told us about the history of the cave and then speculated that in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s several people likely died deep inside the cavern when fuel in their lanterns ran out. Without the benefit of any illumination, they would have been trapped in a maze of deep darkness. To illustrate the point, the ranger turned off all the lights and suddenly we could see nothing – absolutely nothing. There wasn’t a speck of light anywhere. And then from the darkness, the ranger asked: “OK, if you were in this situation how would you find your way out of here?” There was a nervous

chuckle among us. Then the ranger said: “Well, it’s your lucky day. I think I remember the way out. Take hold of each other and follow my voice.”

In that terrifying darkness, we inched our way forward often bumping into each other and the damp, cool cavern walls. Eventually, we came to a place where we could see a shaft of light and that led to the exit. But what would have happened if by arrogance, ignorance, or stupidity we had decided NOT to follow the rangers’ voice?

As people of faith, we know that we are trapped in the dark caverns of sin and disobedience and despite our best efforts, the only way to experience the sunshine of forgiveness is to listen for and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd who KNOWS the way and IS the way!

But you know the problem! Every day we are forced to listen to 1001 different voices all competing for our attention, allegiance, and money. Voices telling us to take this cruise, buy that car, or eat at a certain restaurant. Voices suggesting that all of Western civilization will collapse unless we vote for this or that candidate no matter how intellectually or morally bankrupt they may be. Voices urging us to be satisfied with the average...the common.... the ordinary.... the mundane and the mediocre. All unreliable, untrustworthy, undependable, fake, nonsensical voices.

Steve was one of my classmates in seminary. During his ministry, he would take five days off before the beginning of Lent and enter a remote, desert monastery for prayer and devotion. He was not allowed to take his phone, computer, iPad, or radio. And, except for one hour during

dinner, the remaining 23 hours of the day were spent in silence. No one in the community said a single word!

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One year, in a Lenten note to classmates, Steve wrote: “Late last night while sitting in the desert silence, under a canopy of a billion stars, I heard the voice of God.”

Away from the clamor and chaos of everyday life, Steve heard words of compassion, kindness, and encouragement.

Think of all the competing voices Jesus had to listen to during his brief, three-year ministry. Voices that praised and glorified him. Voices that condemned and belittled him.

Is it any wonder that the Gospel writers remind us that Jesus would often go out into the wilderness to get away from it all? And there, in those quiet moments, under a canopy of a billion stars, he listened for that single, solitary voice he had learned to recognize, trust, and follow.

We know that Lent is a time for reflection, confession, repentance, and refreshment. It’s a time to renew our promises, pledges, and commitments to God and others. A time to embrace a life of sacrifice and service.

May it also be for us, literally or symbolically, a time to sit under a canopy of a billion stars and listen for the voice that invites us to follow. Amen