

American Lutheran Church of Sun City
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 9 – March 10, 2024
Pastor Scott Klimke

Numbers 21:4-9
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

We're going to spend some time with the hymn "Rock of Ages" today. I'd suggest to you it's a fine example of how all that we do as the Church is to preach and teach the Good News of Jesus Christ that has been handed down to us. In the Church, styles and sensibilities will change, but the substance they carry and convey is to remain the same. And as both "Rock of Ages" and our reading from Ephesians testify, free, unmerited divine grace at work in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit's gift of faith is what Christianity is all about. More so than anything else, it's divine grace that gets faith going, and that shall keep it going for as long as it's necessary.

As an example of this, sing, if you'd like, the second verse of "Rock of Ages" with me. "Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands. Could my zeal no respite know; could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone. Thou must save and thou alone."

"Thou must save and thou alone." It doesn't get much clearer than this. We desperately need divine grace; the power and the prerogative which is God's alone. Apart from divine grace, our reading from Ephesians says we are by nature children of wrath on our way to death; people whose limited possibilities will run out long before we run even close to the unlimited

possibilities of God. My, oh my, do we need divine grace; the power and prerogative of God which interrupts the natural flow of things for the better.

Now to be clear, we don't just need divine grace at the end of life when we appear unworthy and guilty before the judgment seat of God. We need grace through every minute of the Christian life. We need grace to repent. We need grace to have even a smidgeon of faith. We need grace to grow in faith and its fruits. Even so, it needs to be said that baptism is one of the places where grace is most transformative. Sing with me again if you would like. This time it's verse three. "Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to the cross, I cling. Naked come to thee for dress. Helpless look to thee for grace. Foul, I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die."

"Wash me, Savior, or I die." This is the divine grace at work and afoot in baptism. "Foul, I to the fountain fly." This is divine grace at work and afoot in baptism. The same can be said for "naked come to thee for dress." In the early Church, we know that people were baptized buck naked and only afterward dressed or clothed with a white baptismal gown. As "Rock of Ages" tells us more than once, baptism is a means of grace. Our reading from Ephesians likely has baptism in mind when it says divine grace has made us alive with Christ, raising us up with Christ and seating us with Christ in the heavenly places. And remember this is said as we're reminded none of it is our doing. Is it any wonder that our second reading concludes today by affirming that we are not what we make ourselves, but what God has made us and that's people created for good works in Jesus Christ! I think not. It's always divine grace that creates faith and the Church and that keeps faith and the Church going, with preaching and communion and the mutual comfort and consolation of the faithful building upon what the divine grace active and afoot in baptism begins. But down through the ages, we've had a way of obscuring this.

Down through the ages, we've said all kinds of false and misleading things about divine grace, and here are a few examples to illustrate this habit and history. Grace is only grace if I'm old enough, or cognizant enough to remember it vividly. Grace doesn't work unless I assent to it first or trust in it first. I'm not ready for grace until I can understand it. Grace will become mundane and ordinary, less special if I overuse it. In every case, what we have here is paper-thin and unable to withstand even a little scrutiny. For starters, grace that depends upon us isn't grace. It's a reward. To go on, grace that depends upon the color or the volume of the earthly elements involved is a Rachel Ray recipe that puts ingredients before the grace that transforms them for our benefit. As for understanding grace, who knows and understands the mind of God? Grace that I can understand and anticipate isn't grace. It's an equation or formula I can repeat at will. It's a word I can spell over and over. And as for grace I can overuse and make it less special, this too isn't grace. It's not something I need and cannot provide for myself. It's a tire that can run out of tread; an aspirin I only need when I have a headache. Grace is not what we think we need. Grace is what God knows we need and will never provide if left to our own devices. When you get down to it, I'd suggest all the brackets and qualifiers we've put on and around grace don't tell us a single, solitary thing about grace, as they also tell us much about our fear of grace.

Let's face it. As the prerogative of God and God alone, grace is wild and free and spontaneous, blowing, like the wind, where and when it will. It's true that for our benefit God has appointed and set apart means of grace like preaching, baptism, and communion, and the mutual comfort and consolation of the faithful, but God's still in charge. As the prerogative of God and God alone, grace is always going to be wild and free, and spontaneous, and we don't like this. Having domesticated the wolf and the horse and the desert otherwise known as Phoenix, Arizona, we want to domesticate grace too. We want grace to be less revealing of our

rough edges and of what we don't know. And yet, we've yet to touch upon what probably scares us about divine grace the most.

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Divine grace insists we each matter more than we want to matter. Every time we try to pass the buck, divine grace will say, "Somebody else is dead. You're up." With all of us created in Christ Jesus for good works, it can be no other way. And given our reputation for being a denomination which needs to be reminded that faith without works is dead, this kind of empowering, enlivening grace scares the dickens out of your average Lutheran. Shy and quiet and understated, we'd rather skip over the passing of the peace than expose ourselves to the reality that the words and gestures we might share when out of our pew could provide the grace of God somebody else needs. And if we're ever going to get past such fear and timidity in any aspect of our faith journey, we're going to need an awful lot of one thing and that's the divine grace that gives us faith in the first place and that strengthens and matures faith once we have it. It's a reality "Rock of Ages" underscores for us through the words that close out its first verse. If you wish, sing with me again.

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee. Let the water and the blood from thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure. Cleanse me from its guilt and power." Did you hear that? Always works in progress rather than a finished product on this side of the hereafter, we need grace for more than one thing. We need the word and water of baptism to cleanse us from the damning guilt sin assigns to us and then we need the blood of Christ to cleanse us from sin's ongoing power over us and our faith; freeing us to make more and more of the difference our reading from Ephesians insists we can make as those created in Christ Jesus for good works. Again, and for the final time today at least, divine grace is the engine that gets Christians and their faith out of the gate, and that keeps the race of faith going after it's begun.

In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, may we make our ongoing need for divine grace and God's willingness to provide it as obvious and evident as possible in everything we do as American

Lutheran Church of Sun City. Amen!