

**"Refreshment Sunday
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – March 10, 2024**

**Please Read:
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21**

The color purple has an interesting ambiguity in the liturgical calendar. It's the color of repentance and grief, but also the color of royalty. I love the fact that whoever designed this sanctuary had the prescience to choose my favorite color for the main theme of the stained-glass windows of this sanctuary. I love the way that on three walls of this room you can see outside into the world, but you look through a slightly purplish haze. How does that color affect what we see?

I'll tell you a secret: Advent and Lent, the two purple seasons, are perhaps the favorites for most preachers. We love Lent because we have six whole Sundays when we can preach up a storm. It's the season of sackcloth and ashes, the long fast, self-denial, the prophetic focus on sin and its consequences. Mardi gras is over and we are down to the realities of gaunt faces and a forty-day look at the mangled form of the one *our* sin hung on the cross. Preacher gets to play the prophet at Lent. We get to look at the world through a laser lens of critique. The ridiculous politics, the unspeakable violence, injustice, racism and oppression, adultery and truth twisting, the petty backbiting and gossip that is so much a part of human relations are all topics on the preacher's block of rightly dividing the Lenten Word.

And the beautiful part is, people generally love it. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... and "the wages of sin is death..." "All like sheep, have gone astray," we cry. "Pick up your cross and follow Jesus!" We're just telling you what you already know, but don't want to admit in polite company... Just read any newspaper for unimpeachable evidence of Calvin's doctrine of *total depravity*.

But today, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, as the church makes its weary way toward the cross, there is a pause. This is called "Refreshment Sunday," or "Laetare Sunday" in the Latin, which means "rejoice!" or as the French put it simply, *mi-carême*, "mid-Lent." It's also known as "Rose Sunday." It is a lightening of the fast and a reminder of God's love. That's why in Advent we have the pink candle on the third Sunday of Advent. Like on the 3rd Sunday in Advent we remember God's love, so on Refreshment Sunday in Lent, we remember God's love for all.

Since the Middle Ages, this Sunday has been a break in the severe Lenten fast. In the relatively gloomy way toward the Passion of Christ, the gospel for this Sunday

is John 3. It serves as a pause in the penitential procession so that we might put the cross in proper context.

It's a time to remember again the heart of the gospel, what Martin Luther called *the gospel in a nutshell*: "For God *so loved* the world that God gave his only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." God so loved the world, loved so much that God gave. Not to condemn but to save, John says. Not to condemn.

In the midst of our trivial moralizing, our parental scolding, gratuitousness, and scramble for a few brownie points, John reminds us of why we're here. We are on the way, not because of what *we* have done, or left undone, but because of what *God* has done. The cross is not simply one more piece of damaging evidence against guilty humanity...

No. The cross says that the goriest work of human sin gets sidetracked into glorious divine redemption. The prophet preacher is sent not to scold, but to save. The Lenten preacher has come to lift up, not tear down. No more hellfire, but healing. We do not look at the cross, to see what we did to Jesus. We look at the cross, John 3:16 says, to see what God has done for us!

Another of my favorite passages in the New Testament is from our Ephesians text. I could preach on this all day... Fear not, I would invite you simply to note there is nothing you can add to what God has done for you in Jesus Christ. It's all about *grace*. Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." It's so simple. We can't earn our salvation. Once we accept by faith that God truly loves us and calls us God's beloved, we are free to live a new life. We can't help but live out the good works for which we are created. It's a paradox, but so important to get this straight.

Indeed, today we remember the *other* significance of the color purple: That it is the color of royalty, prominently displayed in the paraments and windows to remind us that we are called beloved of God, the beloved *children of God*. It means that we not only find our identity as *forgiven sinners*, but as *beloved heirs of the King*. If we were simply forgiven, our debts would be cancelled and that's great, but it still leaves us with zero. But as the heirs of the king, we have an inheritance of riches stored up for us to the end of time! What do you see through that lens?

That's the surprising Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's called "Adoption Theology." God has adopted us as beloved children. Oh, what riches are ours in Christ! That's the Good News of what God has done for us that we could not do for ourselves. It was out of love that Christ came among us, and stood beside us, and died with us, for us, and saved us. Love is the main thing with our Lord...

In Alice Walker's book, *The Color Purple*, we learn about the trials and tribulations of Celie Johnson, the protagonist of the story. Through racism and sexism, she endures the violence and abuse of this world. But from Shug Avery, her jazz artist lover, she learns that purple is a reminder there is beauty in the world that God doesn't want you to miss. Shug warns Celie, "It annoys God...if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."

Oh yes, says the church at mid-Lent. Yes. Now we remember. It was for this that we began the Lenten Journey. It was not for sackcloth and ashes, whips, the sacrifice of an after-dinner martini or chocolate that we are here. It was love that put us in this parade. We bow not as miserable worms, but as those humbled by the sheer wonder of the gift. It was not to condemn us that our Lord bid us bear his cross, but to save us. We are here not as the lost, but as the found. The color purple reminds us to see the whole truth of who we are.

As Kierkegaard said, "God creates out of nothing. Wonderful, you say. Yes, to be sure, but God does what is still more wonderful: God makes saints out of sinners."

So, as we prepare to come to the table today, I invite you to first to look again at the beautiful color purple in the glass surrounding us and in the paraments draped over us. What do you see? Friends, get your purple on! Close your eyes and imagine that you are in the presence of the Holy One... You are finally face to face with God whom you spend so much of your life avoiding. Then, before the cross, God says, "I sent my Son into the world, not to condemn, but that you, indeed the whole world might be saved through him... I gave everything for you and call you beloved. And know that while there is yet so much brokenness in the world, I have come not to condemn, but to save. Fill up on the bread and the purple fruit of my table. Be strong to share my love, because you are beloved!"

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.