

Order of Worship

Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2021

WELCOME

Hello God, thank you for this day.

It's 9:03 and we need your help.

Guide us by your Holy Spirit to reach new people,

Connect us all through Christ's love, and

Empower us to love and serve others. Amen.

PRELUDE *Kyrie in D Minor, IV. Cornet de Récit* J.F.J. Benaut

CALL TO WORSHIP Psalm 107:1-9 UMH 830

HYMN 98 *To God Be the Glory* TO GOD BE THE GLORY

SCRIPTURE Ephesians 2:1-10

PASTORAL PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

HYMN 385 *Let Us Plead for Faith Alone* SAVANNAH

SCRIPTURE John 3:14-21

MESSAGE Rev. Rebecca Voss

GENEROSITY, INVITATIONS and CELEBRATIONS

HYMN 519 *Lift Every Voice and Sing* LIFT EVERY VOICE

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE *Kyrie in D Minor, V. Grand Jeu* J.F.J. Benaut

PRAYER CORNER

Our beloved Janice Normand has entered eternal peace and joy with our Lord. The visitation will be from 10-noon and the funeral at noon on Saturday, March 6 at Peterson-Kraemer Funeral Home (East Side), 1302 Sixth Street, Wausau, WI 54403. Please pray for her family and many friends as we celebrate her life and grieve our loss.

Thirsting for God *STRUGGLING* Pastor Rebecca Voss

A girl lamented to her dad that life seemed to be one struggle after another. Even when she managed to solve a problem, another one popped up. She was frustrated and worn out. Her dad led her into the kitchen and got three pots of water boiling on the stove. He put potatoes in one, eggs in another, coffee beans in the third, and simmered them each for 20 minutes. His daughter wondered – and probably rolled her eyes – about how this related to her struggles.

The father pulled a potato out of a pot and said, “It started out hard and inedible, but now it is tender”. He took an egg out and cracked it, revealing a hard-boiled egg and said, “What was once fragile is now strong”. Then he strained the water used to boil the coffee beans into a mug and said, “This time it’s not what was in the water, but the water itself that was made into something far better.”

One of the greatest lies repeated by many Christians are promises of “health, wealth, and prosperity” for people who believe in Jesus. People are led to assume that if we use our brains to think and mouths to say the magic words, “Jesus is Lord”, then God will rescue us from the struggles of life. The Biblical word for “believe”, *pisteuo*, means far more than the power of positive thinking to help the struggling. To truly believe means to be persuaded and have confidence in the midst of struggles. It is trusting that God’s grace – often in the form of a struggle – is like boiling water softening our potato-like hearts, strengthening our egg-like emotions, or changing water into coffee to invigorate the lives of people around us.

“The struggle is real”. We struggle with times of tempting and suffering as we focused on the past two weeks. We also struggle to get motivated, struggle to balance and prioritize the demands of life, and struggle to know and do the right thing. The Apostle Paul puts it best in Romans 7:15-20. This passage is a tongue-twister, so it’s also a struggle to say! *“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”*

I'm grateful for Paul's honesty. It could sound like he's making excuses, but he is setting us up for a new perspective. As today's reading from Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "*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.*" In other words, we can't rely on our human strength to overcome our struggles, and we can't take the credit for the positive outcomes of our struggles. But it doesn't stop there. The very next verse reminds us that God's grace does not let us off the hook in how we act but prepares us for a life of good works. "*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.*" (Ephesians 2:10).

These three verses (Ephesians 2:8-10) hold the tension of how grace, faith, and works are to be balanced in the life of a Christian. First, God's grace is the foundation. God's grace is the source of both belief (faith) and good works (actions). Neither our good deeds nor even our faith can save us. They are like the two wings of a bird – both are necessary to fly, but neither can move without the grace of God and Breath of Life filling the bird.

We often struggle with moving our two wings of faith and works to help us fly well. Some people naturally gravitate toward relating to God through faith in their mind and heart, and others prefer to focus on actions of service as a response to God's grace. I'm not convinced any of us will ever fully find the balance as individuals, but it's a goal worth moving toward. This is one reason that God calls us together as the church – the Body of Christ – is to receive and share God's grace as we balance faith and works. It's not simply so we can sing songs and sit in a building together on Sunday mornings. We are called together so we can receive God's grace and be transformed and empowered by the Spirit. We are made to use the wings of faith and action together to show God's love and grace to the whole world.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life". John 3:16 is likely the best-known Bible verse, but we rarely read it in the context of today's Gospel lesson. We glance at the phrase "*everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*" and think Jesus is saying that we'll have eternal life if we believe he was a real man who lived, healed, died, rose, and taught people great things about 2000 years ago.

But as James 2:19 says, *“Even the demons believe—and shudder.”* There’s obviously a lot more to believing than meets the eye, and Jesus explains a lot more in the verses that follow. John 3:18b-19 explains, *“...those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”* Without God’s grace, we often believe lies and put our faith in things that will eventually fall apart. Without God’s grace, we spend our energy doing things that God’s light will reveal are actually evil. But God’s grace is fully given to us in Jesus. Here are Jesus’ very words, spoken to us: *“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who **believe in him** are not condemned;”* (John 3:17-18a). *“But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their **deeds have been done in God.**”* (v. 21).

The way of believing in God (faith) and deeds done in God (works) is like two sides of the same coin as explained in James 2:17-19, 24, 26: *“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder... You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone... For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.”*

Christ’s life, death, and resurrection are our ultimate example of how grace, faith, and works operate in complete harmony. As a complete act of selfless grace, God became a human and endured the same struggles (if not worse) that we do. Jesus didn’t just think and talk about faith and live happily ever after. Nor was he busy with so many good deeds that he lost track of why and for Whom he worked. *“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* (John 3:17).

In the middle of whatever struggles you are going through, God is offering love and grace. We can’t earn it by believing or doing the right things. God’s grace enables us to both believe and do the right things. May each of you – and all of us together – be filled with Jesus’ love and grace to soar on the wings of true faith and good deeds. Amen.