A Sermon Delivered by
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Fourth Sunday of Lent
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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)

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Lent, and we are well into the Lenten season. The passage from today's appointed Gospel lesson may sound somewhat familiar because as a phrase, it is considered one of the comfortable words of our liturgy; and is found in the Eucharistic Rite I section of the Prayerbook (page 332). This passage also suggests a distinct thematic shift away from the dire messages of temptation, sin and evil that we have been hearing in the lectionary, and a refocusing instead on the good news that lies ahead, in fact the abundantly good news, which goes so far as to actually delineate the promises of God. The reason for the change may be that as we approach Easter, we gradually become more hopeful.

So I intend to stress the positive, not the negative, in my remarks this morning. That said, there is always the danger of becoming irrelevant and out of touch with too much sugarcoating. If our faith does not connect with our living experiences then it is not worth retaining. To extend Socrates dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living," I would simply add that an "unexamined faith is not worth believing." What is needed is a positive affirmation of faith, grounded at the same time in the reality of experience.

So let's go to Square One, and look at the core of our faith by examining the so-called promises of God. What are these promises, and how can we recognize them? In classic Trinitarian fashion I would like to cite at least three.

And to begin, the lectionary gives us a hint. "God so loved the world"… That is a promise written into the original intent of creation. God created the world with a spirit of love. Unlike the cosmologists who advocate theories such as the Big-Bang or the Steady-State hypotheses, God did not simply

engineer a mechanical or physical universe that worked according to absolute principles or laws. No. There was a spirit behind creation. God breathed on the waters, and there was life. That life created by God was infused with love. And it follows that we can view that action as “divine love.” Furthermore, “divine love” can be trusted, believed in, counted upon, and cherished. That is a promise that God makes to the world from the very beginning. God so loved the world - Why? - because God’s love is primary.

Second; God so loved the world "that he gave his only begotten son”. Now we move into the action and activity of God inserting himself into our human realm, into history. God becomes a player in the predicaments of life, and is seen as a transforming agent for our human condition. But where is the promise here? Why would God give us his son, especially if God had already created a perfect world? Does this suggest in some way that God didn’t really achieve his goal in creating the perfect universe after all? Theologians far brighter than I, can speculate on that question in learned journals or at academic conferences; yet for me, the interesting thing is that God apparently loved the world so much that he did in fact send his son to correct the shortcomings of the world, and to overcome the temporal limits inherent in the plight of humanity. The fact is that human beings messed things up, and the history of world civilizations suggest that nations haven’t quite figured out how to live peaceably with one another, or for that matter with nature itself, and are desperately in need of outside help, or some would even suggest, divine intervention.

Well I can’t speak for you of course, but I have to be honest and say for myself, that I recognize I am a flawed product of creation. And I admit as a human being, to paraphrase the Prayerbook, “I haven’t done those things I ought to have done, and I’ve done those things I ought not to have done.” Regrettably it seems, “there is no health in me.” Furthermore, using the lyrical magic of Elizabethan English, I “acknowledge and bewail my manifold sins and wickedness, which from time to time I most grievously have committed, by thought, word and deed, against thy divine majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against me.” Somehow the soothing beauty of that language, takes a bit of the sting out of my transgressions.

Yet the deeper point is this. My all-too-prevalent misdoings and shortcomings lead paradoxically to God’s faithfulness. We are never abandoned, no matter how depraved or how low we may stoop in our moral

behavior. God loves us enough to send his son in order to save us. That too is a promise of God. Not only has God sent his son, God continues to send Christ, his son among us, every time we gather to remember his presence at the holy table.

And that leads to the third and final piece of good news: the promise that "everyone who believes in him (that is, believes in Christ) may not perish but may have eternal life." This is perhaps the most amazing promise of all. God promises us eternity. Think about it. The veil of tears in daily existence is not all there is to life. The slings and arrows of critics, enemies, and even our friends at work, at home, on the job, at school, or even in our fractured families; all this will pass, and God will forgive us of our complicities and wrongdoings. In fact, God will grant us entrance to life eternal – completely underserved. And that's an amazing promise. Amazing grace.

As they say on late night TV – how can you pass up an offer like that? God is there if we are open to his presence. God is alive, if we are willing to acknowledge his vitality. And God is compassionately redemptive, by infusing our lives with love, meaning, and purpose. If we will only let God dwell at the core of our identity, and refrain from pursuing our own desires or personal agendas, we can be saved. God is there, because it is God's nature to be a living presence among us as "we live, and move, and have our being" (again quoting the Prayerbook).

So to conclude, here's the definitive good news. You are not required to do anything, nor subscribe to any belief other than the traditional creeds. Rather as a Christian you are welcome to attend and invited to participate with no strings attached, "Just as you are without one plea." Ours is a fellowship that reflects the love of God. It is a community of faith that reaches out and shares. And its mission is summed up rather well in the Vision Statement of St. Peter's Church, which permeates and guides our life together.

So let me close with that statement, because you wrote it yourself, and it speaks volumes of who you are as people of faith.

Rooted in love, we

Share the good news as taught by Jesus Christ
Come to the table together
Grow deeper in our faith and communal life

Growing through God's grace, we

Seek Christ in all persons
Recognize and nurture the gifts of children, youth and adults
Take care of each other at all stages of life
Live as faithful stewards of the Earth

Reaching out to all, we…

Serve those in need both near and far
Seek rapport with the worldwide Anglican Communion
Initiate and reinforce interfaith connections
Welcome and embrace diversity
Speak for peace and justice in the world (…and)
Promote the Millennium Development goals in our response to world issues

All this work needs to be done in the light of God's promises to us. If we are fully committed to the task the assurance is given that we will prosper and succeed. And we ask that this be done…

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.