

February 17, 2021
Christ the Rock Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Ash Wednesday

1) It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. *John 13:1*

Theme: “Jesus Keeps His Promise of Love”

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

(reading from various Valentine’s cards) ... “Sweetheart, you will always be my valentine.”
“Honey, my love for you is unending.” ...

Last Sunday was Valentine’s Day. It’s a time to smile in the gloom of winter, to bask in the warmth of other’s love for us. Oh, sure, we know that the phrases in those cards are more beautiful than words we might come with. We know the Valentine’s candy is loaded with too many calories, and the roses are short-lived. Still, we enjoy Valentine’s Day. Why? Because people — all of us — have a desperate need for love. Unfortunately, much of what we know as love disappoints us: the high school romance that didn’t last and hurt so much when it was over; the wedding vows of many that fail the test of time; the love we shower on our children that is unappreciated. Is it any wonder that we enjoy Valentine’s Day? We crave love, even those shallow promises of love.

Tonight as we begin our Lenten journey, God comes to us and reminds us that there is One who not only promises to love us, but keeps His promise too.

I. An unexpected and undeserved promise

The promise to which I am referring was first spoken to Adam and Eve in that garden paradise called Eden. These two people desperately needed to hear words of love. Why? Because they had sinned against their Creator. The story is familiar to all of us. God had told them, **“You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die”** (*Gen.2:17*). Unfortunately, Satan convinced Eve that God was holding out on them. She became suspicious of God’s love, believing that God had something good going with that tree and He didn’t want to share it with anyone. So, she disobeyed God’s command and Adam followed her lead and did the same. The consequence of their action was immediate and painful. For the first time they knew guilt and felt the terror within caused by sin. All excuses were useless. They had defied God and now were destined for punishment in hell. They couldn’t escape. They had killed the perfect love and holiness in which God had created them. What else could they expect but God’s righteous anger and punishment?

But something totally unexpected took place. Yes, God would carry out His warning: a day would come when they would die. But He also gave them a promise of love. He promised a

Savior who would come and crush Satan's head, a symbol of the control Satan has over mankind. God promised that this child, this offspring of a woman, would keep His Law perfectly, as Adam and Eve had not. And God further promised that this Savior would suffer for them and for all humankind the punishment sinners deserve—the physical pain of death and the agony of hell.

A promise of love—unexpected and undeserved—that promise is also for you and me. Oh, we NEED that promise, and how!! There is no “missing link” between us and those first human beings. Sin is the link. We, too, have rebelled against the Lord. How many, many times have we understood perfectly God's will for our lives, but then gone and done the exact opposite? How many times haven't we doubted His love, thought that by His commands He was preventing us from enjoying something pleasurable? Many, many times! Like Adam and Eve, we too can run, but we can't hide. We can make excuses, point the finger at people who are much greater sinners than we, but it doesn't wash away our guilt, no more than pointing out that someone's house is a real pigpen magically cleans up the messes in our own homes. Yet, despite the evidence of that link in us to Adam and Eve, we may still feel that we are somehow entitled to God's love and blessing.

A man once came to his pastor with a Bible question. “Pastor,” he said, “I've been studying the Book of Romans, and in chapter 9 it says, **“Jacob I loved but Esau I hated”** (Ro.9:13). I have difficulty with that thought.”

“Yes, that is a difficult verse,” the pastor replied. “Tell me, which part of the verse is difficult for you?”

“Well, the part about God hating Esau, of course!” the man answered. “I can't understand why God should hate Esau.”

“Ah,” said the pastor, “my difficulty has always been with the first part of that verse. I cannot understand how God could love the sneaky, deceitful scoundrel that was Jacob ... or, for that matter, how God could love anyone of us.” That's the point, isn't it? Truth is, there isn't a one of us who doesn't have reason to stand trembling in fear before God; not a one of us who couldn't confess, “Lord, I've been trying to give you the run-around. I haven't been on the inside what I pretend to show to others on the outside. I haven't kept my promises to you, and I know I deserve only punishment from you.”

Thank God, however, that He does the unexpected and undeserved for us too! He promises forgiveness, love and blessing.

II. A promise fully kept

But when God says, “I love you,” He doesn't just sign His name to a card and hand it to you. He backs up that promise of love with action. The Apostle John writes in his first epistle, **“This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him”** (1 Jn.4:9). Jesus is the proof of God's love for us! The love of God is the reason Jesus brought His disciples to the Upper Room the night in our text. John writes, **“Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father”** (v.1). Jesus was always aware of why He had come into this world. We hear from the 12-year-old Jesus telling Mary and Joseph, **“I had to be in My Father's house.”** (Lk.2:49). At His

baptism He told John the Baptist that His baptism was necessary to fulfill the Father's plan. He came to do what the heavenly Father wanted. That night in the Upper Room Jesus knew that all the promises God had made would reach their climax in the next 20 hours. For this He had left the Father's side in heaven. For this He became fully human in every way. For this He obeyed perfectly where we had failed. For this, to be our Substitute, our Savior, He came.

And now ***“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end”*** (v.1). (The King James version says, ***“He showed them the full extent of His love.”***) Towel in hand, we see Jesus kneel before each one of the disciples to gently wash their feet. The Master has become the servant. Before He gives the commandment, “Love one another just as I have loved you” (Jn. 13:34), Jesus demonstrates that same unexpected, undeserved love of God. Where the disciples had failed to love and serve one another, Jesus loved and served.

But that was not the full extent of His love. No, His love went beyond service to sacrifice. Our text reminds us that this was the night of Passover. How fitting. Passover was the time when sacrificial lambs were chosen. On this Passover God's very special Lamb was being readied for that ultimate sacrifice of the cross. Ahead, in those next 20 hours, were inescapable, horrible tortures: a whipping post, a crown of thorns - a reminder of the consequence of sin, that thorns and thistles would make life miserable for mankind. Ahead for Jesus was the cross, insatiable thirst, great waves of pain that would jolt His body with agony. Ahead for Jesus was the suffering of hell, the loneliness of a soul cut off from God. In His mind that night in the Upper Room, Jesus could see it all coming. None of it—the betrayal by one of His own, the trials, the beatings, the cross — none of it came as a surprise. So why ... why did He do it? What moved Jesus to endure such agony? Love! Love for His Father ... love for us, for this whole lost world. Yes, He could have bypassed that room and disappeared into the night. But He did not. A promise of love had been made. That promise would now be kept.

On Valentine's Day promises of love are made and renewed. In some cases, however, it will happen that the love one person feels for another is not reciprocal. It happens. A boy or girl falls madly in love with someone who could care less for them. Is there anything more pathetic or sad? Yes, indeed. Unrequited love toward God. That's far sadder. We could even say that it is beyond belief.

How should we respond to God's promise of love? Humility would be a good starting point. We ought to be humbled to think that the One we deny and defy in countless ways would so love us!

Second, we need to keep before us the wonder of all those promises God has made and fulfilled: He sent the Savior we needed. Through Jesus we are completely forgiven. Through baptism we are remade as children of God. Through His own Holy Spirit we are kept strong in our faith and taken through death to the glory of eternal life.

Is not a God who would do all this for us worthy of our trust? We can trust that because He has kept His promise of love, He will also keep the many other promises recorded in Scripture: promises to see us through the hard times, to never leave or forsake us; promises to bless us, to guide us when we are in danger of losing our way; promises to hear our prayers and answer them in our best interest. Because of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, we can trust not only in that

paradise He has prepared for us, we can trust that in this life, too, our God is with us - always.

Is not a God who would do all this for us more than worthy of our love? As the Apostle John said, “*we love — we love because He first loved us*” (1 Jn.4:19). God’s love is what moves us to gather together for worship. God’s love is the “why” behind the investment of our time, our energies, our prayers, our offerings, our efforts to reach the lost with the message of salvation.

Tonight God comes to us with more than a Valentine promise of love. He comes to us in Jesus and in His Word. Jesus keeps His promise of love. May we rejoice in that love and readily respond to it. Amen.