

[BLANK] Well, we're back to rain again today, but I hope that you had some time to enjoy some of our recent sunny weather. Our Christian season of Lent gets its name from an old English word, a word that meant the lengthening of days. In our season of Lent, we are growing our Christian faith as we see the hopes of Spring returning in longer days, an opportunity for new growth in God's world, and in our hearts.

On Ash Wednesday, we remembered that we are the dust of the God who created our earth for life, not death, and that we are meant to return to God as God's dust now, not waiting for later. On our first Sunday in Lent, we asked God to purify our hearts, to wash away everything that was the sign of death in our lives, and to strengthen our hearts for faith, feasting on nothing but Godly living. And now, this Sunday, we are here to offer God a pure heart that is ready to commit to growing in the Way of Jesus Christ, as the next step in our Lenten journey.

Commitment is not a popular word these days. Commitment means filtering out options that distract us from our most important relationships and goals. Commitment means investing time, treasure, and talent, tending to the little things that can make the difference between keeping our commitments, or falling from them.

[TREE] I have been reflecting on the memorial tree on the wall of our narthex, our entryway into our church. I see there a tree with the names of families with deep, deep commitment to this church, with deep roots in this community, with a strong trunk, and branches filled with the names that have grown out of this church from its many generations of commitment to faith. [ACORN] I see precious acorns that have fallen from this tree before their time, memories of loved ones who we would have hoped to come into the full fruits of faith. This is a tree of love, love that is committed to this church.

[LEAVES] And I see also on this tree many blank leaves, leaves of hope, leaves that show me that we are a church that is meant to make room for future growth, for new generations, new individuals and families who want to be part of the tree of Godly living, new memories of how God changed our lives for the better in this place of grace. To fill the leaves of this tree, and to plant even more trees of faith in the name of Jesus, will take a new kind of commitment from this church, and from many churches in the world today. Would you pray with me, please. [BLANK] [PRAYER]

[PORCH] On Wednesday, the Reverend Billy Graham, the most famous Christian evangelist of the 20th century, passed away at the age of 99. [REVIVAL] Reverend Graham is perhaps best known for his enormous outdoor revival events in cities across the world after World War II. Let us remember that we were then a nation that had gone from the heat of global war to a new Cold War, a struggle between the nations allied with the United States against the Soviet Union, a massive struggle for world power.

Reverend Graham's message was simple, and powerful. God loves you, but God knows that you will not get to heaven unless you repent of your sins and commit to Christ, and he believed that God wanted a Christian America to defend the world against godless Communism. Across our nation and the world, tens of thousands gathered to hear Reverend Graham's preaching, and he brought many people to faith.

[FAMILY] In the 1950s, churches across America were filling up with people who believed that to be American meant that you were a Christian, and to be a Christian was to be an American. In 1952, Dwight Eisenhower, just before becoming our President, said that “our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is. With us of course it is the Judeo-Christian concept...” General Eisenhower, the former supreme commander of Allied forces in World War II, wanted all faiths to fight against Communism, and Christian faith was to be America's great weapon in this fight. [BLANK]

Well, America won the Cold War, more or less. But by the time that the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, America's love affair with Christian faith was no longer what it had been. The story of America was no longer what it had been. We became a more complicated nation, a more educated nation, a more diverse nation, a more tolerant nation. As we walk down the streets of our city, we see some families who grew up as a part of that great family tree in our narthex, but many who did not. And so, to be a Christian in this world, today's America, requires a new kind of commitment; or, perhaps, a very old kind.

In Mark's gospel today, Jesus is breaking some bad news for his followers. In the exact middle of Mark's gospel, things have looked just about perfect to his disciples up to this point. Jesus had healed people all over the place, he had given them faith that fed thousands of people, and the power and wisdom of God was so very clear in Jesus. When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?,” his disciple Peter said immediately and confidently that Jesus was the Messiah, the savior that would lead Israel to freedom. To follow Jesus was to fulfill the destiny of Israel, as a nation and as a people.

But at this turning point in Mark's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples what committing to him will mean. It will mean that they will suffer, and that the leaders of Israel would reject them. It will mean that the leaders of Israel would kill Jesus, not raise him up on a throne to be Israel's king, as Peter had hoped. And, most amazing of all, Jesus said that he would rise from the dead three days after his death. The power of Jesus would conquer death itself!

This was not what Peter had hoped to hear. Peter was, to put it mildly, freaked out! Peter started criticizing Jesus for his vision of the future. How could this be a future that the disciples of Jesus could commit themselves to? Their own families, their own culture, would reject them. Their own dreams would vanish. To Peter, Jesus was asking for a commitment that would destroy everything in his story, and the story of Israel, that made his life worthwhile.

But Jesus rejected Peter's criticism immediately as the work of Satan. And, sadly, Jesus was right. God didn't come to the world as Jesus, the Christ, to make people's stories turn out the way they wanted. Our will, the will that plucks apples from God's tree of life, and claims them as our own, like Adam and Eve, leads to death, not life. God came to earth as Jesus, the Christ, so that our stories could turn out the way that God wants them to turn out. And God's story is about having faith so deep, so loving, so committed, so sustaining, that we will no longer fear death, or fear the things in the world that turn our hearts towards

death. Our commitment to Christ is to carry our own cross, knowing that Jesus will lift it from our shoulders, forever.

I love you, I love this church, I love this community, and I love the opportunity to grow this church, through faith in Jesus Christ. And because I love you, like Jesus, I must tell you the truth about what it will take to grow this church. God's church will not grow on leaves that stay empty. As much as we love what God has done for us, we must commit to a faith that helps new people to see what God can do with them, and for them, on the tree of life. It is only God's growth in us that will grow this church.

This growth must build on the beautiful legacy of love that you have built here in Christ, but it must also become a love that commits us not only for our own families here, but to the family of God in Christ that can grow in faith here, for their sake, for your sake, and for the world's sake. It is a commitment to God's most precious gift of all, the gift of eternal living here on earth, a gift wrapped in the cross that is the gateway to easter sunlight.

Return to the God who loves you. Purify your hearts, with the love of the God who wants to save not just you, but the way of life in Christ that saves the world. And then, with a heart that is willing to let God help us to be willing, commit your will and your life to a walk of faith, a walk that we'll never do alone, a walk that will lead you, your family, your friends, your community, your nation, and God's beautiful creation, to a bountiful harvest from God's tree of life. This is a place of grace that is meant to build this legacy in Christ through a commitment to faith, for God's sake, and for our sake. May we do so as God's church on earth, now, and forever. Amen.