

[BLANK] [PRAYER] Thank you for coming tonight. Tonight we begin our journey, in our season of Lent, towards easter sunlight. It is a night when we invite the sun to set on the ways that lead us away from God, so that we can move, from certain darkness, into the light of faith. It is a night when we invite you to wear a mark, a mark that puts God’s claim on us, as God’s dust; God’s creations. God’s invitation to us, the dust of God’s making, is to reclaim our identity as God’s dust. In coming tonight, we say to the God who made everything, “It’s me! I’m the one who you made! I remember you! Do you remember me?” Tonight we claim ourselves as creations of God, who were never meant to be less than part of God’s good Creation.

And yet, God has always meant us to be more than God’s dust. God calls us tonight to become children of God - new creations of God, new creations, in Christ. Just as Christmas is the story of the birth of Christ, Lent is the story of how the new creations in Christ, called Christians, are born. Tonight we announce ourselves as people of Christian faith, seeking the mark of our saving God. In the time of Moses, the people of Israel, slaves in Egypt, marked the doorposts with the blood of a lamb, killed for their Passover feast. The mark on their doorposts cried out to their God on that first Passover in Egypt, “It’s me, God! I remember you! Please, remember me! Have mercy!”

Our journey in Lent lasts forty days, plus the Sundays between now and Easter. Like the people of Israel, who journeyed away from Egypt for forty years, towards a place that promised joy, and new life, we are getting ready for a journey of preparation, of purification, of listening to God, so that we may follow God’s ways, as we hunger and thirst for Easter joy, and Easter living. Tonight, we cry out for salvation. God’s answer is a journey, towards our salvation. Tonight, we cry out to be at peace with God. God’s answer is that we must learn how to be instruments of peace, in our own hearts, and in the world of God’s making.

This new birth into being fully Christian in Lent starts in darkness that we have made, a darkness we call sin. “It’s me! It’s me, God! But...” We return to the God of our making tonight, knowing that it’s not quite as simple as saying, “It’s me.” We come with baggage. We come with excuses. We come with scapegoats for why we haven’t come back sooner. And, in a humble moment, we confess, by being here, that we can’t look anywhere but the mirror for why we need to be here, even if we want to be here. It’s not them, God, we admit: It’s me. We are our only excuse for not turning to God. We don’t want a journey, we say, in our sins. We just want wholeness, on our own terms. Maybe, even, like some of the people of Israel, we really just want to stay in Egypt, slaves to a world of sin.

Tonight invites us to a journey where we will learn to see not only our own salvation, but the need for all of God’s world to be saved. Tonight begins the process of understanding that, in order for God to save us, we must become, as children of God, aware of everyone, and everything, that is crying out for salvation. We must become, not just Christians, but a Christian people, learning the disciplines of faith to work together towards salvation. In our Methodist beliefs, personal holiness, our efforts to live a pure life, in faith, cannot be separated from social holiness, our efforts serve God’s world as a

Christian community, to bring the world into God’s purity.

The prophet Isaiah saw this, hundreds of years after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, through the desert. In our reading tonight, he points out our need to fast from our personal sins, as we seek personal holiness: our hurt given to others, in words, and in deeds; our blaming others; our hating others. Isaiah tells these people, long after Moses, what good is your fasting, if you have brought the love of God into a pure heart, but left God’s world with broken hearts? How can you be at peace if they are not at peace?

Our journey this Lent must include others, seeking to be in Christ, if we are to be servants of God’s greater peace. We start this season of Lent tonight, by asking God to purify our own hearts, in Christ, so that we might bring God’s purity to God’s world with the love of the risen Christ as our strength. It is that love, that strength, that will breathe new life into us, and into God’s world.

As I was inviting people all around Meriden today to receive ashes on their foreheads, a woman approached me with a story of salvation. She had been trained in CPR techniques many years ago, but never had to use them. Then, very recently, she found herself pounding on a man’s chest, bringing the breath of life back into him. She was amazed at how she, just an everyday person, could do this. From death, a common person brought life. From the ending of a person’s story, she brought a new beginning to the story of a creation of God.

We can do the same, through our devotion to our faith in Lent. Lent is training for the road ahead, for a time when, much to our surprise, our gifts of faith, training to help us help God’s world, to bring life back from death. We will prepare quietly, and humbly, not drawing attention to ourselves for our commitment to this journey. It will be, as Jesus suggests in today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel, as if we’re living a good life already. Our training in Lent is not a punishment, but a preparation for being a people who can do more than just live a good life. We will become a people who bring God’s new life to the world, as everyday people, trained in God’s life-saving gifts of faith, in Jesus.

“It’s me! It’s me, God! I have returned. I claim my place as your good creation, born of your dust. I want to be marked by you, ready to follow you, on a journey of hope. I want your help to leave the darkness behind, because the journey is so hard to start, even if it brings me to daylight. Help me tonight, God of my salvation, to journey with you, in you, and for you. Remind me of your commandments along the way. Bring me into humble, joyful, and grateful obedience. Help me to keep your disciplines of love, for you, for me, and for others, as we prepare to be servants of your healing in this world. Help me to feel fed and loved on this journey, so that I can endure, all the way to the joy and peace of an Easter sunrise, and beyond. Help me to have faith in your peace, peace that will be with me, and others, even after we have turned to dust, again. Be with me, and with all of us, I pray tonight, in thanks. It’s me, God. It’s You, God. Claim me as your own. May it be us, always, together with your world, for your world. Amen.”