

SERMON – THE 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT (PASSION SUNDAY) – 03 APRIL 2011  
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

---

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Anyone who has dared to stand before a parish and preach knows full well the humbling sense of inadequacy; of what it feels like to grapple and read, imagine and ponder, research and fumble with scripture that fairly defies being unpacked and interpreted so that parishioners can find those few moments of speaking useful. Sometimes such a priest will look back over what has been written and pronounced in the past and say under their breath, "I can't believe I actually said that!!" Sometimes the person in the pew probably says exactly the same thing! Those same clergy also know the disappointment of having missed the Gospel hidden in a text and replaced it with law and demand which stirs up guilt, but does not really set people free. My father has often commented that one of the saddest components of the church's life are those persons who hear only enough of the demands of the faith to make themselves truly miserable, but not enough of the grace to be truly filled with joy in living.

The Epistle for today is from St. Paul's correspondence with just such a family—the community in Galatia. They have started our well enough to form a church, to impact the community around them, and to bear witness to the power of Christ, but now an ever present danger arises. It is the fear and doubt that grace is really substantial enough to carry and sustain them into an unknown future. Can they really set out on this journey of faith armed with nothing but the graces which the infinite love of the crucified Christ provides them? And of course that same question mark applies to us as well. Can St. John's have a future? How will our meager resources be enough for us to be a force in this community? You and I know full well that these concerns are alive and well among us even if spoken only in soft whispers out in the parking lot or in private conversations. It would be so much easier IF we could peer into the coming days and years ahead and concretely see where we are going and where we are going to land. But the true enemy here is not smallness, nor is it lack of funds, or our own sense of

personal limits and inadequacy. It is the fear that comes from uncertainty—fear that seems larger than the actions of the God who has saved us. It is the very real human desire for absolute security before we launch out into the future.

The Galatians struggle with this and come up with an answer. We will revert back to the LAW. We will make a rigid and tight set of rules for ourselves and serve those images, and we won't have to risk living by faith but by human certitude. Paul starts out by cajoling and adding a bit of harassment. He says earlier in the letter, "O foolish Galatians, who has beguiled you". It is not really a question but a confrontation. It is a mirror that he holds up for them so they can see the turns and twists they are taking. But he does not stop there. He goes on to hold up their real destiny which can only be found by trusting in the God of Israel who offers them a choice between bondage and freedom; between life made over by human endeavor or by life lived in light of God's promises/ And then he tells them and us a story—an allegory he calls it. We are not accustomed to allegories—we generally like to get it simple and straight forward. But the story he recounts is real and in it they get to see the options and benefits of each.

This past week I had an encounter with a young woman that brought this same struggle down from the theoretical to the very concrete. She called and asked to come to the study and gave no clue to her concerns. Once there she told of her life situation. She is a single mother with two young boys, one about 6 and the other 2. They have different fathers. The father of the younger boy often comes to visit and take his son with him for a weekend, but the father of the older son is basically absent and without apparent concern. The dilemma that brought her to talk about this is the recent change in the 6 year old's behavior. Four times in the past week the mother has received phone calls from his school indicating a variety of behaviors that cause trouble and concern. Fighting, breaking out a window, and insistent defiance have come to the surface in a here-to-fore loving child. His physician says there is nothing wrong physically, and the school psychologist can't see any "illness" causing this. We can imagine it is the cause of

considerable concern and suffering for the mother. What, she pondered, is behind this? Our conversation, while confidential, did lead to one very real possibility, namely, that he sees his brother having a relationship which he is missing. In short, he seems to have lost a sense of having a meaningful future. There is a lack of promise in his life, and he is in bondage to his fears.

Paul's story is not really so different. He tells the Galatians and us, too, that our own journey in this world will be marked by a backdrop—a frame of reference that will color all we think, do, and hope for. Our sense of the future will either be marked by our efforts to secure what cannot be secured by us, or it will be made secure by trusting in the God who is good on his promises. We are after all children of a promise—made to Abraham and his progeny, kept clear in the prophets, uttered in prayer by the Psalmists, and finally brought to clear focus in the death and resurrection of our Lord. This should come as no surprise to us. How often in your life in the middle of the tightest dilemmas or tragedies, in the face of challenges you thought you could not make it through, have you heard in your soul the voice of a partner, a parent, or a family member words reminding you that this path is not trodden alone? My grandmother used to say—“remember who you are”. In other words—remember you are a child of this family and that carries with it nurturance and support. It is living within a promise that you are not alienated or alone.

So today we come to the half-way point in Lent and what the Church has called “Refreshment Sunday”. It is that time between Ash Wednesday and our journey of self-denial and reflection, and Palm Sunday and Holy Week where we see God fulfill what He has promised. We are given a break in our Lenten discipline to recall the feeding of the 5,000, where everything is gathered up so that nothing will be lost. That is not about the scrapes of food, but about God gathering and caring for those to whom he has promised a hopeful future. This Eucharist today is a solid sign of the future and a

reminder that we are children not of unmanageable requirements or fear or anxiety, but of the promise. Amen+