

GOD FINDS US DIRTY AND LEAVES US CLEAN

1ST Sunday In Lent

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St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Watertown, WI

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Grace is yours and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Word of God I'll share with you in this first Sunday in the season of Lent is written on the inside cover of your worship bulletin. It is something the prophet Isaiah wrote, chapter 64:4-9:

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.

This is the Word of our Lord.

In Jesus Christ, who is the focus of our worship and our praise and our meditating this season of Lent, my dear friends.

The thing I dislike most about this time of year is that when I let my dog outside, she always comes back with muddy paws, and I have to clean her paws. I wash them, make her clean again every time, several times a day; and I keep telling myself, "I love my dog, I love my dog, I love my dog...." And yes, I do love my dog – that's why I clean her. Then it dawned on me as I was studying for this sermon that's exactly the way God treats me. God finds me dirty, and he leaves me clean. And that's what I'd like us to focus on this morning.

God finds us dirty, and he leaves us clean. Now Isaiah was the prophet who wrote these words. He was the prophet who spoke primarily to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, but his words rang out throughout the world. Isaiah boldly proclaimed the word of God, which included some scathing judgments against the nations around, including the nations of Judah and Israel. He issued some dire threats of God's punishment, including that punishment of being carried off into captivity because of Judah's consistent neglect of God and persistence of sinning. But his words also included some very beautiful and wonderful pictures – words of the hope that was to come from God's Messiah. His message was simple and clear. Return, repent, and be renewed. The purpose of his writing was to call Judah back to God and to tell of God's message of salvation to come through the Messiah.

Now the truth Isaiah writes here is that God wants to bless us. God is looking for people to bless. He says in here that since the world began, no ear has heard, no eye has seen a God like you, who works and acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You welcome those who cheerfully do good, who follow godly ways. And that's the truth - that God is looking for people to bless.

In 2 Chronicles 16:9 it says that the eyes of the LORD search the whole world in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. His eyes are searching throughout this house of God right now, looking for the hearts of those who are fully committed to him to strengthen them. What will he find in our hearts? He's looking for people who wait for him. That phrase used in the Old Testament "wait on the Lord" means to expectantly hope, to put your hope in the Lord and in his word. It means to have faith and to trust in God, to take him at his word and cling to that Word in hope. He's looking for people who cheerfully do good – not that you do good and you begrudge doing it, or you do it, but you don't feel like doing it. God isn't interested in that. He's looking for people who cheerfully want to do good.

The same thing with our offerings – God doesn't want you to give if you are giving reluctantly or under compulsion. He'd just as soon you keep those offerings to yourself. God loves a cheerful giver. He's looking for hearts of people who cheerfully do good in order to bless them. He's looking for people who follow godly ways, who are looking in this crooked world for the right path to walk in, for the right way to treat people, for the right way to think, for the right way to act and walk, because it isn't found anywhere else. He's looking for godly ways. This is what God is looking for.

Now when Isaiah wrote this chapter, in the first three verses he took a look at the condition of the nation of Judah, and it was pretty sad – a lot of selfish people, people who were taking advantage of other people, hurting other people; and he was hoping that God would come in a very visual and powerful way to shake these people up. He said "O that you would burst from the heavens and come down, that the mountains would quake at your presence, that as fire causes wood to burn and water to boil, your coming would make the nations tremble. When you came down long ago, you did awesome things beyond our highest expectations; and oh how the mountains quaked." He recalled those times that God shook those mountains and God's people shook at the foot of those mountains. But did it change their ways? No. They still continued to sin.

And so, why doesn't God come in those rich and powerful ways? Is the problem with God? No. The problem is us. It's like Isaiah wrote that we are not godly; we are constant sinners, so your anger is heavy on us. How can people like us be saved? When we are honest, truly honest, not faking, not deceiving ourselves, but in the face of God's Word we say, "You know, Lord, I'm not godly. I am a constant sinner. And you are right in having your anger heavy on me." How can people like us be saved?"

He goes on to say that we are all infected and impure with sin; we are like one who is unclean. What does that mean? Lepers were considered to be unclean. If anybody was considered to be unclean, that meant they were separated and they were cast out of society until they became

clean. That's the only way they could come back in. God saw our hearts as unclean; and like lepers, we deserve to be cast out.

And then he says that even our righteous acts are like filthy rags. Even the right things we think we are doing look like this in the eyes of God. (This is the rag I use to clean my dog.) Now, I don't think my guests would be too impressed if I folded this up and put it on their bed and put a nice little bar of soap and one of those little mint things on it, right? I don't think they'd be too impressed with this, do you? And God is not too impressed with us either. When we offer this in pride – that's what he says – when we proudly display our righteous deeds, this is what they look like in the eyes of God. When we think we should gain acceptance in God's eyes by our good conduct, this is what it is.

How many times have I heard people say, especially at a funeral, "Oh, she was such a good person; oh, he was such a wonderful man.", and in most cases they are right. But they did not get to heaven because they were good people. They get to heaven because they trusted in Christ, because they were cleansed by the blood of the Lamb.

He goes on to say that we are like autumn leaves that the wind swept away. I walked out my door; and, you know, I raked my lawn four times last fall, and I'm still finding leaves. And to think that because of my sins, I could be just like this leaf – swept away by the wind.

The other problem with us is what he says here in verse 7: **No one calls on your name** or pleads with you for mercy; therefore, you turned away from us and turned us over to our sins. The other problem is not just an unclean heart; it's an unconcerned, uncaring, indifferent attitude on our part toward God and things that are spiritual. I see people that are passionate about the Packers and about politics, but they almost never talk about things that are spiritual. They'll never talk about the new level that God is moving them to in their life. They'll never talk about what they're struggling with or the victories God has given them over things in their life.

I find people are more faithful in watching "Friends" or "Survivor" than they are in coming to church. We're more faithful in reading the paper than we are in reading God's word. We have a "ho hum faith". Should it come as any surprise that God would be angry with us and want to sweep us away like leaves in the wind? Therefore, you have turned away from us and turned us over to our sin. That, my friends, is the worst judgment of all when God just lets us go our own way and do our own thing and suffer the consequences, not realizing that the ultimate consequences would be in turning his back on us forever in hell.

Our cavalier, spiritually cold attitude is the problem - and the solution? You were wondering when I was going to get to that. The solution isn't going to be found inside of us. The solution isn't going to be found in any self-help book. The solution is found in God sending his Son into our world. You see, God finds us dirty, and the only way we can be clean is through his Son, Jesus Christ. The same message that Isaiah gave to the people of his day he is sending out loud and clear today – return to God, repent of your sins, and be renewed by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

In 2 Chronicles 7:14 it says **If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.** And that is exactly what God has done for us in Jesus. God would have every right to wash his hands of us, wipe us out, and send us away, let us waste away on account of our sins; but he couldn't do that. You know why? It says here **But you are our Father**, and we are his children. And because God loves us is why he sent his Son; and in his Son, in Jesus, we have redemption, salvation, forgiveness, and through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. God wants to wash us; he wants to make us whole and clean.

In Ephesians chapter 5 it says that Christ loved the church, showed her His love, and gave up His life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by baptism in God's word. He did this to present her – that's you and me – before God to Himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish - holy and without fault. And that is how you and I look to God – no spot, no blemish, no faults.

They've all been ironed out; they have all been washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. Those loved ones of ours who are in heaven got a picture of that in Revelations 7:13, 14. One of the twenty-four elders asked John, who wrote this, "Who are these who are clothed in white? Where do they come from?" And I said, "Sir, you are the one who knows." Then he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white." That, my friends, is how God sees us now. He doesn't see us as the old sinners; behold, we are a new creation in Christ. The old is gone; the new has come. It is God who has done this through his Son, Jesus Christ – through His life and His death and His resurrection to life.

In those beautiful words that God writes in the prophet Isaiah 1, he says to wash yourselves and be clean. Let me no longer see your evil deeds. Give up your wicked ways, learn to do good, seek justice; help the oppressed, defend and fight for the rights of widows. He says, "Come now, let us argue this out," says the Lord. "No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can remove it. I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool." God wants you to stand before him in his presence now and forever as his children. Now those righteous things we do are filtered through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Remember those things your kids made in school – they're so ugly that they're beautiful, aren't they? You take and you proudly display them. Sometimes you put them on your refrigerator with the magnets. That's how God sees the things we do now – impure, tainted, but made pure, made clean, made pleasing in God's sight by the blood of Jesus Christ. And even though we keep getting dirty several times a day, God keeps cleaning us up because he is our father and because he loves us in Jesus. Yes, he finds us dirty, but he always leaves us clean. Thank God. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall guard and keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.