

Lenten Worship / Sermon Series: Spring Cleaning

February 22	First Sunday in Lent	“Spring Cleaning: Past”
March 1	Second Sunday in Lent	“Spring Cleaning: Present”
March 8	Third Sunday in Lent	“Spring Cleaning: Future”
March 15	Fourth Sunday in Lent	“Spring Cleaning: Here”
March 22	Fifth Sunday in Lent	“Spring Cleaning: There”
March 29	Sixth Sunday in Lent/ Palm Sunday	“Spring Cleaning: Everywhere”

“Spring Cleaning: Here”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Lent, Sunday, March 15, 2015
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Numbers 21: 4-9 John 3: 14-21 Ephesians 2: 4-10

Numbers 21: 4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.”

So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3: 14-21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not

come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Ephesians 2:4-10

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Look Up

This week the local newspaper published a piece
about a fellow clergyman in the Atlanta area
who asked his congregation to purchase a private jet
for his use.

Cost: \$65 million.

Yes, sixty five million dollars.

As this morning’s message was given to my soul to share with you,
a message on looking up to see the glory of God and God’s
glory in each other,

I had a fleeting thought that after our all-church
luncheon at noon

we might depart this holy and sacred space,
step outside onto our church lawn,
look up,

and watch the good reverend
flying across the sky,
leaving in his wake a
jet trail

of empty
wallets, purses and
promises.

I won’t pretend to know the whole story.

As you know, here in the south we grasp the reality that
no matter how thin you mix the batter,
there are always two sides of a pancake.
Having said that, should this significant congregation of Jesus
Christ
become so inspired to go overboard with excess and
expenses and extravagance,
let's invest our God-given resources and energy in
feeding the hungry,
clothing the naked, visiting the sick and
imprisoned,
and working our tails off for justice
and mercy,
starting right here.

As they say, no matter where you go, there you are.
No need to jet off to anywhere else; bloom where you are
planted.
You are here.
You...Are...Here...

Here is where we are planted;
here is where we shall bloom;
here is where God is nigh;
here is where we find the blessed intersection of faith and
reason,
the yoking of mission & fellowship, prayer &
worship, study & service,
the meeting of our deepest gladness and the
world's deep hungers.

Here meet the vocations of the members of the Family of God.
Here we gather as one family around the Lord's Table;
and it is here that Jesus Christ requests his followers look to
Him and live.

Here is where we shall begin; Lord knows where we'll end up.
Yet our spiritual Lenten journeys begin as well they should,
with our feet planted on terra firma,

our souls being where our bodies are
and our spirits eager to...

Look Up

See the glory of God and God's glory in each other
This is what God asked of the Israelites.
Listen to the Word of God from Numbers 21:

⁷ *The people came to Moses and said,
“We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you;
pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.”*

So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ *And the Lord said to Moses,
“Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole;
and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”*

⁹ *So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole;
and whenever a serpent bit someone,
that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

This story in the Hebrew scriptures
took place during the exodus of the Jews after they fled
Egypt.

They had fled the oppression and slavery at the hands of the
Egyptians,

only to find themselves in a barren land,

often hungry and thirsty and in constant danger.

(Talk about leaping from the frying pan into the fire.

Circumstances were definitely not looking up.)

The Good News is that whenever they looked up God was with
them.

When they prayed to the Lord,

their prayers were answered and the Lord provided.

When they were hungry,

God sent them manna, enough to eat for a day, everyday.

When they were thirsty,

God provided water, from a rock no less.
When they wandered and wondered and their lives were aimless
and faithless,
God gifted the community with the Ten Commandments.
Even so, they became impatient and irritable,
ungrateful and, in modern vernacular, whiny.
In their frustration and fear and desire to be in control,
some of the people of God cried out against the Lord.
Suddenly a fiery serpent appeared and killed many of their friends
and family.
They found them themselves being bitten by poisonous snakes,
the kind of snakes which ruin your day and considerably
shorten a lifespan.

The people of God repented.
To repent and believe in the Gospel
is to turn away from the ways of sin and toward the ways of
God.
In loving response God assures us of the grace of forgiveness.

After the Israelites confessed their sinfulness,
their selfish ways and thoughts and deeds,
God responded by doing something quite
fascinating.
The Lord took the same symbol of their punishment, the fiery
serpent,
and used it as a symbol of their healing.
We see this same symbol today, that of a serpent weaving its way
around a pole,
on the sides of ambulances and hospitals and the AMA.
Only God has the power to re-cast an image
from punishment to healing, from death to salvation, from
loss to redemption.
The symbol of God's loving and redeeming power was so
important, so life-giving

that it had to be raised up, high above everyone's heads,
in order that all might gaze upon it to see and follow
and believe

in God's power to heal our bodies and souls,
in God's desire to save us from
death,

in God's loving promise to
find us and free us.

Look Up

Jesus said, *"And so, just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,*

*so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

Once again, God radically converted a symbol,
this time of a man who would be crucified.

The symbol of the cross,
to the Romans a symbol of punishment,
to the world a sign of folly, of foolishness, says
Paul,

yet to those who see and follow Jesus,
the cross is lifted up high
to serve as a symbol of life
and love.

Of course, unlike the fiery serpent in the wilderness then
or the one that emblazoned on the doors of ambulances
today,

God did not send Jesus as a form of punishment.
Instead, thanks be to God, Jesus was sent "to save the world."

Look Up

This is what Jesus asked of Nicodemus.

Early on in the Gospel according to John,
Jesus caused quite a stir.
First he was baptized by John in the Jordan River,
then he went to a wedding in Cana and turned water into
wine.

Immediately afterward he went to Jerusalem and visited the
temple,
where he drove away the animals, turned over tables, spilled the
coins,
and literally called out the moneychangers and
religious leaders.

All this activity and vivid declarations
ignited the curiosity of a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus wanted to meet Jesus.

He wanted to see the Light for himself.

And isn't that an Eternal Truth, we all must see the Light for our
self?

However for Nicodemus there was an element of fear,
fear of social stigma and religious reprisal and personal
commitment.

So he called on Jesus in the dead of night.

Jesus met Nicodemus in private, in the shadows, under the moon.

He explained how faith, how trusting in God opens doors to see the
kingdom of God.

To look up and see the glory of God one must be born again, from
above, *anóthen*.

Nicodemus, bless his heart, tried his best to understand
yet he was not quite there.

The Good News is that Jesus wasn't finished,
not with Nicodemus and not with you and me.

Whether we "are there" or "not quite there"

Jesus will meet with you in the dark or the light,
whenever and however you ask,

wherever your "here" happens to be.

Nicodemus looked up.

Their conversation continued late into the night.

We read in the Bible that Jesus expanded the parameters of the discourse.

You can well imagine more people,

equally curious and wondering,

drawing near to Jesus and Nicodemus.

When you are in conversation with Jesus, and he with you,

there's always room for one more.

Join with Nicodemus and your friends and family and neighbors;

enter into the presence of Christ,

and overhear him speaking

of the nature and nurture of God's

redeeming love.

Look up in awe, for the God of glory is communing with you and yours.

Look Up

In your opinion, who is the hardest person in the world to love?

Tell me, or tell yourself, or simply tell God in the darkness of night.

Do you think you have it in you to love that soul?

What gift of God do you need to receive to love unconditionally?

The nature of God's love is generosity, persistence, guidance, patience.

This is what it takes to be love incarnate in a broken world,

to be a mighty force for wholeness,

so that others may look up to you

and see the trace and face and grace of God.

This is what it means to be invested in the neighbors in your midst.

You are here, a sign and symbol and sacred gift of love,

even when the world rejects you,

even when it opposes and misunderstands you,

puts you on a cross and leaves you to die.
This is what it requires to come back,
to rise like a phoenix from the ashes,
all the while looking up to the Light of the Son...of
God.

Look Up

Look up to God, who asks of you to look within, to look around,
to look up and out and around at your surroundings,
to see clearly the needs and hurts and hopes of
people in your midst,
wherever you are blooming.

While Betty was preparing for her class on “Simple Living”
she read to me a story about a woman reflecting
on people spending their lives looking down,
looking down at their phones or iPads or
laptops.

She recalled once when she was standing on a street corner
waiting for the light to change so she could safely cross.

A gentleman waited next to her for the light to change.

He carried on his shoulder a rolled up carpet.

They made eye contact.

He smiled a funny smile and said that his mother had sent it to
him.

She responded and they had a funny conversation while crossing
the street.

In time they became good friends, got married and now have three
beautiful children.

She reflects back on that fateful day.

She said that if she had been looking down at her phone and not
looking up,

she would never have noticed the carpet,
or the nice man’s face and demeanor,
or even spoken to this stranger-soon-to-be-a-

friend,
soon-to-be-husband and mate for life
and love.

Let this be a gentle reminder for we disciples of Jesus Christ
whose phones or iPads or screens have become biologically
connected
to the ends of our hands and merged with our brain
cells
that these tools may serve to enhance or
expand or expunge
authentic human communication and
relationship building.

The Gospel before us is as clear as the sign of a snake wrapped
around a pole,
as clear as the sign of a cross on Calvary,
as clear as the sign of grace that you bear in your
daring bodies, here.

Look Up

One evening my two Maine friends Pat and Jordan
were walking hand in hand under the northern sky.
Pat said, *"I love you, Jordan. Will you marry me?"*
Jordan answered, *"Yes, I will!"*
There was a long silence as they walked on for a while.
Jordan asked, *"Why don't you say something?"*
Pat responded, *"I'm afraid I've said too much already."*

Unconditional love is cosmic.
Consider how love
is a delightful, transformative combination of belief and
action.
Love convicts -- it speaks to our behavior and belief --

but does not condemn – it never makes personal attacks or put-downs.

Did you ever hear the story of the time that

Sherry Davis and I went out to change the church marquee?
We only had space enough to write, “Love Convicts, Not
Condemns”

After returning to my study I got to wondering.

Something didn’t feel right. Had I misspelled a word?

I grabbed some letters and went back outside on the church lawn.

Indeed, the church marquee read: “Love Convicts, Not Condoms”

In the 15 minutes while our colossal blooper was posted

I wonder how many motorists took pictures with digital
cameras.

Well, we do advocate and practice safe s-e-c-t-s.
Of course, drivers would only have seen our sign if they were
looking up...

Jesus converses with us day and night,

teaching that belief and practice meet where

“those who do what is true come to the light.”

When we love the unlovely,

when we love those who think or feel they are unlovable,

then we will slowly, surely, gracefully, gratefully

find ourselves moving out of the dark and
into the light.

Such a practice of love

has the power to save the whole wide world,

starting here, with you and me.

Love in relationships is where grace is made real, tangible,
touchable,

God with some skin on it.

Are you ready and willing to come out the darkness and into the
light,

to be revealed for the beautiful soul you truly are,
to be held accountable before God and Christ's
loving spirit?

By the power of God's spirit invested in you, will you love?

By the cross of love lifted high before the world
to be a sign of healing and hope, will you love?

By the nature of God within you
to offer guidance and practice forgiveness, will you love?

Look up

See the God of glory and the glory of God where you are
planted,
in the lives of those in your midst.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!