

“Spring Cleaning: Present”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Lent, Sunday, March 1, 2015
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Mark 8: 31 - 9: 1

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” ¹ And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

Lenten Worship / Sermon Series: *Spring Cleaning*

February 22	First Sunday in Lent	<i>“Spring Cleaning: Past”</i>
March 1	Second Sunday in Lent	<i>“Spring Cleaning: Present”</i>
March 8	Third Sunday in Lent	<i>“Spring Cleaning: Future”</i>

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”



Chart created from Christian literature (According to Raymond Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* [New York: Doubleday, 1997]). Apostolic Fathers based on Ehrman’s Loeb editions and Clayton Jefford’s *Reading the Apostolic Fathers Lost Sources*.

Sermon

Primary Through the Door

We know that term.

Even those of us not associated with the local police

know it is about which officer elects to go first into the unknown,

leading the rest of the team to confront or address whatever danger or delight there might be.

It’s the kind of term one finds especially in crime novels.

Author Patricia Cornwell is a prolific writer who has quite a following.

While she has written some non-fiction;

most of her published books are novels,

several featuring Medical Examiner Kay Scarpetta.

Patricia Cornwell was asked to discuss “the book that changed my life.”[\[1\]](#)

Cornwell recalled that when she was in high school,

she wanted to be a tennis champion.

She played the game well and was on her high school’s boys team.

“Winning was never enough,” she said.

“...Losing was a tragedy of mythic proportions.

Then someone gave me a book that changed me forever:

W. Timothy Gallwey’s landmark The Inner Game of Tennis.”

She carried the book with her everywhere and read favorite sections again and again.

“The Inner Game of Tennis taught me how to inhabit a moment until everything is in slow motion – like a ball coming at you, closer, closer; focusing so intensely you see its seams.”

“After reading [the book],

I made it my ambition to pay attention and not live a fear-driven life.

When I sit down to write,

I remind myself to stay in the moment.”

“My philosophy is simple: Keep your eye on the ball. Live life as if you mean it.”[\[2\]](#)

Throughout the liturgical Season of Lent

we are exploring and tapping into the cleansing power of

God

We started last Sunday by examining ways to practice spring cleaning of our past,
living and forgiving from the inside out.

This morning let's focus our spiritual energies together
on the joys and challenges of living in the present,
of being totally aware and in touch with following
Jesus in the present.

Choose this day to follow the One who is...

Primary Through the Door

When Jesus informed his disciples that the Sanhedrin were after him,

and that he was on his way to Jerusalem
where he would be arrested, suffer, and be killed,
and afterward, in three days, he would rise again,
Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

Clearly this is not what Peter had expected when he enlisted in the God Movement.

Just a few minutes earlier Peter had happily professed his faith in God.

Jesus asked everyone, "*Who do you say that I am?*"

Peter responded, telling Jesus and everyone within hearing distance,

"You are the Messiah!"

What do you think Peter should have expected of a messiah, of a Son of God?

As Peter and his neighbors understood,

a holy savior is one who brings to us God's blessings and gifts of protection,

help and hope in times of trouble,

insight and inspiration when the way is dark,

might and right in the fight against

spiritual blight.

Yes, indeed, Peter had a sure and long-held expectation of what a messiah was and is.

However, the idea of a Messiah who was about to pick up a cross and then ask us to follow in His ways of justice and mercy and compassion,

well, as far as Peter was concerned, that wasn't going to cut it.

Peter did what anyone else would do when fears overshadow faith. Peter stepped right up and said exactly what was foremost on his mind.

He rebuked Jesus.

We can well imagine what Jesus might have been thinking:

"I've heard this voice before.

Peter's voice sounds just like the one I heard tempting me in the wilderness."

Jesus spoke directly to Peter, rebuking him right back.

"Get behind me, Satan!

For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Unpack this in modern vernacular:

'Get behind me' means 'Back me up!'

Right about now, he was telling them, is the moment He could use some support.

Jesus is about to be primary through the door,

and He would greatly appreciate knowing

that you will be right behind Him, following in His footsteps.

Primary Through the Door

Then Jesus turned to everyone present and he addressed them and

he addresses us.

*“If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
For those who want
to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel, will save it”* --Mark 8: 34-35

We expect our faith to protect us, to save us, to heal and help us,
to give us peace and peace of mind,
not send us into danger, into the unknown,
not to put us in the midst of conflict and
confrontation.

Maybe we have relaxed, maybe we take “our” Jesus for granted,
maybe we have grown comfortable, wearing our faith like a
favorite pair of shoes.

Maybe we’ve put a bit more emphasis on believing and a little less
on following.

Ask yourself this week

whether believing in God or following the ways of God
is more likely to insist that you change the way you
live in the present
in order to abide by Jesus.

When it comes down to following Jesus and believing in the
Christ,

here is what we know:

God gifted humanity with the blessing a baby born in Bethlehem
named Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth was born, lived and walked this earth,
and was crucified on a cross on Calvary.

Over the course of the three years of recognized and retold
ministry,

he used parables and sermons, prayers and life lessons
in order to model and mold a way of life.

He called people to follow him on the Way,
to yoke their lives and families and work with the ways of
God.

He called people to be totally in the present,
to look and see and respect those in their midst.

He spoke directly to a male-dominated, insular and close minded
society,

challenging them to include and incorporate the lost, the
last and the least.

especially the elderly, the widows, the
marginalized,

the children and women and foreigners, and
even their enemies.

He synthesized the teachings of the Law of Moses and the words
of the prophets,

the Psalms and Proverbs and biblical Wisdom
into simple, easy to remember lessons.

Jesus taught those who would follow him that,

*“The greatest commandment is ‘You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind
and with all your strength.’*

The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

*There is no other commandment greater than these.” – Mark 12:
30-31*

Throughout the gospels the disciples were often confounded
about what Jesus meant when he asked them follow.

Jesus the rabbi made the effort to speak to their confusion.

In Mark chapter 8 He said, *“If anyone would come after me,
let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow
me.”* (v. 34)

In Mark chapter 9 He taught the disciples: *“If anyone would be
first,*

he must be last of all and servant of all.” (v. 35)

In Mark chapter 10 He engaged James and John and his followers

with this lesson:

“Whoever would be great among you must be servant of all.” (v. 43)

These are the teachings of a shaman, a rabbi, a mentor,
a Messiah who calls out to those who would see God,
who crave to be and share the Good News,
who would seek to follow Jesus,
for He is following God, who has already gone where we
are headed.

This is a call, a command, a commission to a way of being,
to become totally engaged in your present,
to be a presence of God in a world that is broken
and fragmented
and eager for you and me to channel God’s
healing and wholeness,
following daily the One who is...

Primary Through the Door

Approximately 20 years after the crucifixion of Jesus,
Paul wrote letters to the first churches.

We have copies of some of them,
including Thessalonians, Galatians, Philemon, Philippians,
Corinthians 1 and 2, and Romans.

We are very much aware that Paul never met Jesus of Nazareth.
When he was still named Saul,
he had a powerful, personal, spiritual conversion
experience

along the road to Damascus that changed his life.
He came to love and believe in the Christ
who was resurrected from the dead and redeemed us from
our sins.

And so he called for us to do the same, to repent and believe in the
Good News.

The prolific writings of Paul shaped the early church,
moving us into a system of belief in a man, a messiah, a
missionary
who had originally called us to follow Him on the
Way.
Fascinating!

The Gospel According to Mark was compiled and produced
around 40 years after the crucifixion of Jesus.

The Gospel According to Matthew and the Gospel According to
Luke were written
around 50 years after the earthly ministry of Jesus.

The Gospel of John came into being around the year 90,
which was a little over 60 years after Jesus walked amongst
God's people.

Interestingly, we can observe with just a bit of study
that the more decades that lapsed
between when Jesus lived and when the Gospels
were written,
the less the writers emphasized following
Jesus
and the greater their emphasis on
believing in Christ.

One might say that the difference is between a way of living and
system of belief.

Both are valuable; both are holy; both have their place.

Disciples of Christ have no creed but Christ.

We celebrate and affirm that God speaks to each one of us,
both personally and communally.

Have you ever considered the differences
and the overlapping theologies of following and believing?

Does one approach connect more with who you are and where God is leading you today?

Go ahead and do your own study.

Read the Bible for yourself, and see what you think and feel.

Respond and explore what the Holy Bible is saying to your life, in such a time as this.

Whichever way the Holy Spirit directs you,
trust that Jesus is going to be...

Primary Through the Door

Jesus instructs us to deny ourselves,
take up our crosses and follow him.

We are not to hate ourselves nor are we to deny ourselves something;

denying ourselves means that we are to negate the grasping
Self

and liberate the greater one.

The greatest thing we can do in the present is to serve and to love.

Love yourself, for you are a beautiful creation of God.

Love God and let God define who you are.

Love your neighbor as yourself,

seeing the face of God in the person next to you

and halfway around the world and across the tracks

and just beyond the border.

Taking up our crosses does not mean

deal with the burdens life has given you;

taking up our cross and following Jesus

is the sometimes painful, often redemptive action

you and I voluntarily take up for other

people.

When we follow God, who is primary through the door,

we put ourselves in our proper place:

behind God, coming in afterward,

following Jesus on his way to the cross.

Jesus motivates not with a threat but with a promise.
He promises that no matter what befalls us, He is with us, in the present.

During the Korean War some Korean orphans were crying all night long.

Nurses and doctors and the staff were at their wits end.

“What can we do to help these children sleep?”

A visiting psychiatrist said, *“At bedtime give each child a small piece of bread.*

Let them hold the bread in their hands as they fall asleep.”

So they did, and the children slept peacefully through the night,
knowing that they would have something to sustain them in the morning.

We know we will be alright because we are following Jesus on the Way to the Cross.

We know this because he has made a way to the other side.

We know that we are connected with the Body of Christ, the Church,

where in Him we are assured of a meal, a Eucharist,
a friend, a hug, an ear, a welcoming gesture, a partner in ministry.

With this faith we feel comforted,

our faith is stronger, more confident, more assured;
with this faith we can cope with whatever it is
that we need to address in the present.

Then, my friends, we can be the example God calls us to be and share in the moment.

A woman was out for a stroll one pleasant evening

when suddenly she fell into a deep hole.

She landed okay but could not get out.

A lawyer walking by heard her cries for help and flipped her his card,
telling her to call him if she ever got out.

A minister walking by heard her cries for help,
and promised her he would inform the Outreach Ministry.

A friend walking by heard her cries for help and suddenly jumped into the hole.

*“Jesus Christ! Why did you do that?” she asked.
“I don’t need company; I need a way out.”*

Her friend replied, *“Yes, and I know the way out. I’ll show you.
Follow me. I’ll be primary...”*

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

Communion Meditation

In her book, Amazing Grace, Kathleen Norris said, “When I first began to attend church services as an adult, I found it ironic that it was the language about Jesus Christ, meant to be the most inviting, that made me feel the most left out. I often felt a void at the heart of things. My Christianity seemed to be missing its center. When I confessed this to a monk, he reassured me, saying, ‘Oh, most of us feel that way at one time or another. Jesus is the hardest part of the religion to grasp, to keep alive.’ I told him that I probably felt Jesus’ hand in things most during worship, whether I was in church or at home, or at the monastery. Just a look around at the motley crew assembled in his name, myself among them,

lets me know how unlikely it all is. The whole lot of us, warts and all, just seems so improbable, so absurd, I figure that ONLY Christ would be so foolish, or so powerful, as to have brought us all together.”

God brings us together to break bread, to share the cup of life, and to be the body of Christ. All who believe, all who doubt, wonder, or seek to know more about the Living Christ are welcome here. The gifts of God for the people of God may appear foolish; yet they have the power to save.

[\[1\]](#) AARP The Magazine, Dec 14/Jan 15. Page 14.

[\[2\]](#) Ibid, P. 14.