

“The Before and After”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
John Knox Presbyterian Church – March 18, 2012

Ephesians 2:1-10 “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

It was fall of 1981 and I was heading to Grantham, England. This is the place I would be spending my junior year in college. After a tearful good-bye to my parents at the airport, I had quite a trip ahead of me. With 2 suitcases, a duffle bag (carry-on) and purse in tow, I was off to see the world. I had to switch planes in JFK airport, not a small place by any means! Then once I arrived in London, I had to collect my bags and take a subway to Kings Cross Railway Station. Now I met a wonderful lady, named Margaret Nash who helped me collect everything, showed me the way and helped me queue up to buy my ticket. The next part of the challenge was to stay awake on the train, fighting jet-lag, so that I would not miss my stop. There again I was assisted by my fellow passengers, who allowed me to dose off and then alerted me to get off in Grantham. The last leg of my trip was to take a taxi to Harlaxton College. As the car turned into the one mile driveway leading up to the beautiful majestic manor, which was glistening in the setting sun and looked like a castle, I knew that this journey had been worth it. I had been a challenge but worth it. I had quite an adventure ahead of me. I also had a feeling that my life would change in this place.

The journey of becoming a Christian can be challenging and also exciting. There are people who help you along the way. There is growth that happens and transformation. God’s desire is that we become stronger in our faith. But in this journey one cannot deny that there will be peaks and valleys. There will be temptations. There will be miracles. There will be happy times and sad times. There will be illness and good health. There will be fellowship with believers and nonbelievers. There will be work in the church and stories to tell. Then when our earthly journey is over, there will be death. We stand firm in the promise that there will be resurrection. Like we say in the Apostles’ Creed, there will be life everlasting.

This journey of becoming a Christian is unique to all of us. I was raised by Christian parents. Christ has always been a part of my life. The good news that I am saved by God’s grace through Jesus Christ is something I grew up knowing. But some folks don’t hear about it until they are a youth or some may be an adult. It is different for all of us. But the gift is the same and it is free to us through our merciful God. All we have to do is accept it.

But there is more to grace and salvation than the promise that this will be our ticket into heaven. It is true that we are saved and our ultimate gift is a place in heaven. There is so much more to grace and salvation which can be experienced here on earth.

This past weekend Revive and Restore Ministries had a Hispanic Women's Retreat here at John Knox. This was the first retreat which this group of women had hosted in Spanish in the United States. They had 120-135 women attend over the course of a day and an half. It was incredible to hear about the healing stories of God's grace that took place in those women. They talked about 2 women, who had been severely angry at each other and had not spoken in years. God's grace was able to mend these old wounds and renew this relationship. They were hugging and laughing and that had not happened in years.

I learned that in the Latino or Hispanic culture many times they are looked down upon because they are women. They are considered weak and many times are not loved by their mothers. They are not allowed to show emotions around men. Men have a higher ranking and are more important in their culture. It was very freeing for them to learn of the grace of Jesus Christ and how much they are loved by God, who set them free from all bondage!

Now you may ask, "How do I know about this retreat?" Well, it comes down to me not being able to say, "No." When they explained what they were doing with the women, they added that they wanted to offer programming for their children. It would be like a mini-Vacation Bible School. You know how I love VBS! So I agreed.

With 120-135 women, we ended up with 55 children on Friday and 45 children on Saturday. Now we have had over 80 children for VBS but not for so many hours and not with babies. This was like VBS on steroids! It was crazy because we had 15 babies and half of them cried! God bless Tina Davis, who was in charge of the crib room!

One of the activities that we did with the children was a feet washing. We had 3 tubs of water set up in the sanctuary while their mothers were eating in Fellowship Hall. I was wondering how the 3-5 years old children were going to handle this. Would they be going wild, running around the sanctuary not being able to focus? Would they splash water everywhere? But they were mesmerized when they put their feet into the warm water. When they felt that water wash over their feet and their soul, they knew they were special in God's eyes. They felt God's grace and were renewed! What a way for them to begin their faith journey!

There are forces that pull on us in our daily life. These are the forces we wrestle with throughout our lives, which are just like the temptations that Jesus experienced in the wilderness. We have the forces of Satan, the evil one or as the letter in Ephesians refer to it as the "Powers of the Air". Some of us have a more difficult time than others fighting these forces.

My brother, Jon, who I shared during my Advent sermon was adopted, wrestled all his life with these forces or inner demons. He fought addiction to drugs and alcohol throughout his short adult life. It was this abuse that led to his death. He always struggled with choosing from right and wrong. But he knew that Jesus Christ was his Lord and Savior and he had his final peace. I had that reassurance at his funeral. But I wish he could have grown in his faith on earth and knew more about grace and salvation.

5 years ago this coming June, my brother, Tim, and his wife, Susan, gave birth to a 5 pound baby boy, named Matthew. He was born with severe birth defects and only lived 45 minutes. They knew early on in the pregnancy that Matthew had problems. Tim and Susan decided to continue to carry the child and let him live for as long as possible. I was blessed to baptize him. They were blessed to have him for a short time. They also know that there is the promise that they will be reunited with him one day. But, you know I can't imagine how they carried on with life. I think after the funeral I don't think I would have the strength to get out of bed. But they did. You would think that they would have been angry with God and I'm sure there was some of that, which is okay. But Susan and Tim were able to heal from their brokenness. Their faith today is stronger than ever! They

relied on this precious gift from God, their faith – their strong faith, to give them new strength, new life, new hope.

God's gift of grace and salvation is not only something that grants us the ultimate prize of eternal life in heaven. But God's grace and salvation, which grants renewal and wholeness, is experienced every day in our journey as a Christian on earth.

Our grand prize in this journey will be a spot in the heavenly places. What a glorious place this will be! There will be no more struggle with good and evil. The external powers that we struggle to overcome will be gone! Our sins will be no more! Recently, our Committee on Preparation for Ministry talked with one of our seminary students about one of the lines in his statement of faith. This is a statement about what he believes. He declared, "Christ had vindication when he was resurrected from the dead and then he went on to heaven, where he is Lord and King of all creation." When asked to explain this, he shared that when Christ was resurrected he conquered death and sin so we in turn will conquer death and sin because we are with Christ. We will all have our Easter morning and that will be glorious!

Our journey does not stop with salvation. Because we are alive with Christ, we are also created in Christ to do good works. Good works have nothing to do with the forgiveness of our sins. Good works has everything to do with our relationship with Jesus Christ. As Walter Brueggemann says, "Good works are the activities of those who are saved". (Text for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary based on the NRSV; Westminster John Knox; 1993; p. 226) We do good works because we are created in Christ. We do good works because Christ came into the world to serve not to be served.

As we grow in faith and grace, we change and take on new challenges. What I did back at Harlaxton at 21 years old is not what I would do at 51 years old. I wish I would have drunk less at the pub at the end of that 1-mile driveway although it was good fellowship. Even though I did do a lot of traveling, I wish I would have made my way over to Wales and Ireland. I wish I would have served that community and got more involved in the church. I certainly changed and learned from that experience! There was a friend who I met there and he shared the Bible with me like no one else had ever done. It was more than just stories. It became a road map for my life.

We find ourselves in the thick of this Lenten season making our journey to Jerusalem. Remember a couple of weeks ago; I said our Lenten journeys are like clearing out our flower beds, preparing them for new growth. It is about pruning back the overgrowth and clearing out the dead to make room to welcome our Savior on Easter morning. How will we welcome him with refreshed souls and newness in our hearts?

We also find ourselves 2 weeks after our 50th anniversary. I remember Frank talking about the challenges of us moving into the future after the celebration. Judy Ricketts stood up here talking about all the wonderful great things we had done over the years. All the awesome stuff and things from our past, some of which we no longer do here at John Knox. That is okay. Those things had run their course and we stopped doing them. It made room for new things. What comes after the 50th year anniversary? What comes next on our journey of Christianity? What good works are we created in Christ that is still left to do? Frank talked about all the people who come through our doors during the week. Maybe we need to have a couple people greeting those people every night, sharing our faith and welcoming them back on Sunday. So that they know about the gift God has to offer for all of us. What has God have prepared for us as we move into the future? May we be ready and prepared to use the gift of grace and salvation here on earth as well as what waits for us in eternity. Amen.