

February 25, 2024 – Genesis 17:1-16, Romans 5:1-11, Mark 8:27-38

People of every religion have things to remind themselves of what they believe. Jews have the yarmulke. The little round hat that they wear to keep their heads covered at all times so that they remember that God is always watching what they do. Hindu women have the bindi. The little dot on their foreheads. That symbolizes the chakra, the spiritual energy, that flows through them. Muslim men wear the turban to remind themselves of Muhammed, who also often wore a turban. And Christians, of course, have the cross that we wear on necklaces and jewelry. A reminder of the Jesus and the crucifixion.

It's commonplace to have these little symbols to remind us of our beliefs. Because, frankly, it's easy for us to forget. It's easy to get caught up in daily life. It's easy to get caught up in the physical and forget the spiritual.

We see that all over our lessons this morning. All three, in fact, deal with the struggle that God's people have to keep their focus on things above and not on things below. As Jesus put it, to keep their minds set on the things of God and not on the things of man.

We see it with Abraham and Sarah. God gives them the incredible promise that we hear today. To make Abraham and Sarah a great nation. The father and mother of a multitude. Too numerous to count. As many as the stars in the sky.

And yet, how does Abraham respond to this promise? He has a son by his wife's maidservant. How does Sarah respond to this promise? She laughs at it. All they can think about is how Sarah is too old to be having any children. How utterly impossible it is for this to occur. They have their minds set on the things of man. Not on the things of God.

We see it in Romans. Paul is talking to a group of people heavily persecuted for their faith. The Roman emperors were brutal to Christians living in Rome. The Emperor Nero, who was reigning during this time, most of all. He was a madman, who regularly executed Christians for entertainment.

And the Christians living in Rome are in complete despair. Because all they can see around them is suffering. They can't see that suffering produces endurance. And endurance, character. And character hope. They have their minds set on their pain and persecution and on the things of man. Not on the things of God.

Peter also falls into this same trap. He gives an absolutely perfect answer to Jesus' question. Who do you say that I am? You are the Christ. The anointed one. The savior of the world. Good answer, Peter. You have your mind set on the things of God.

Or do you? Because the moment that Jesus starts talking to them about His mission as the Christ. About suffering many things. About being rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes. About being killed. Peter completely loses focus.

Never mind the fact that Jesus has just promised Peter that after it all happens, he will rise from the dead in three days. No, Peter rebukes him. And is rebuked in response. Peter thinks he has his mind on the things of God. And, on the surface, maybe he does. But underneath it all, he's just as focused on the things of man as anyone else.

As sinful human beings, we're really good at remembering the things of God on the surface. We're really good at hats and bindi dots and turbans and even crosses around our necks. We're really good at the outward displays of devotion.

And for a religion of Law, that's all you really need. For a Jew, all you need to remember is to tithe and eat kosher food and keep the Sabbath. For a Hindu, all you need to remember is to meditate and do good deeds. For a Muslim, all you need to remember is to pray and to obey the laws that Mohammed taught. And even many Christians believe that all you need to remember is to go to church and be a basically good person.

But those are religions of the Law. Those are religions based around what we do. And so remembering to do all these outward things is all that matters.

But Christianity is unique. It's a religion of the Gospel. It's a religion of God's grace and mercy. Where the things we do are irrelevant. And the things that God does are everything.

We see that all through Romans 5. It is God who justifies us by faith. God who gives us peace through our Lord Jesus Christ. God who pours his love into our hearts. God who died for the ungodly. God who shows his love for us. God who saves us from his wrath. God who reconciles us by Christ's death. God who saves us by Christ's life.

God does everything. And what do we do? "*We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.*" That's it. Paul says that once near the beginning of this passage and once at the very end. Our entire role in salvation is to rejoice that God did it. Eleven verses spelling out every aspect of our salvation in perfect detail. And what role do we play? We're the ones saying, "Yay God!" at the end of it all.

But it's true. And we see this over and over again in scripture. This past Wednesday, I discussed the sacrament of Holy Baptism at length in my sermon. And that's a perfect example of what I'm talking about. A great many people look at baptism and see only an outward sign. They see only an act of the Law. Jesus said be baptized and so we prove how obedient we are by being baptized. End of story.

But that misses the great power of God found in baptism. As St Paul will say just one chapter later in Romans 6, to be baptized is to be buried with Christ and raised to new life. Raised to new life by the same power that raised Jesus Himself from the dead. To be baptized isn't just a reminder of God's work. It is God's work. No different than the resurrection of Jesus Himself was God's work.

Could Lazarus take credit for Jesus raising him from the dead? Could the widow of Nain's son or Jairus' daughter take credit for Jesus raising them from the dead? They were already corpses when Jesus got to them. And the only thing they could do was praise God for giving them life again. And that only after he had already done all the work. Baptism is our resurrection. And a dead man can't take credit for being raised from the dead.

When we set our minds on the things of man, we see only plain water and a sinful person. But when we set our minds on the things of God, we see rebirth by water and the Spirit. New life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A robe of Christ's righteousness that covers all our sin. A completely new identity, brought to life by Christ's own death.

Through Holy Baptism, we are each a new person in Christ. Children of God who are now free to have our minds set on the things of God. Who are now free to lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel. Who are now free to deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow Jesus. Not because denying yourself or taking up your cross or losing your life are such great deeds in God's eyes.

No, you deny yourself and you take up your cross and you lose your life because there is nothing you could ever do with your life that would be better than what Jesus has already done for you. There is no good work you could ever do that would compare to the good work that Jesus did on the cross. There is nothing of value that you could ever contribute to the Kingdom of God that would be worth more than the gift that Jesus gives to everyone baptized in his name.

While you were yet dead in your sins, God decided your life was priceless. And saving you from death and hell was worth paying the ultimate price. Though you were a sinner who had done nothing good, in his love, God decided you were worth dying for.

And yet the really crazy thing is that, having been bought at a great price by God himself, we are now worthless to ourselves. We have nothing to earn, nothing to protect, nothing to take pride in. Because we live in the hope of the glory of God. We have nothing to lose because God has given us everything we need for all eternity.

As God kept his promise to Abraham, so he keeps his promises to you. As Jesus rose from the dead, just as he said he would, so also you have been resurrected from spiritual death into eternal life. That is what it means to set your mind on the things of God. And so I wear a cross around my neck not as a reminder of what I need to do. But as a reminder of what's already been done for me. Amen.