

Lent and Love

"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father - to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen. "
(Revelation 1 :5,6)

For weeks Michelangelo, the Italian artist, had been on the scaffold, painting the ceiling of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel. So accustomed had his eyes become to looking up that it hurt to turn them downward to look at the ground. Our problem, on the other hand, is often the opposite. We fasten our eyes on the ground and have trouble raising them to heaven. But this Lenten Season can be different. This Lenten Season we can once again raise our eyes heavenward and marvel anew at the love of God behind our salvation.

He *"has freed us from our sins,"* the Apostle John wrote. Lent is not only a time for the upward look at God's love, but also for the inward look - the one which gazes inside ourselves to see what we really are. And the more we scrutinize ourselves honestly, the more marvelous God's love appears.

So what do we see when we look at ourselves? People worthy of God's love, or people with sin's dirt deeply embedded beneath the fingernails of daily life and with sin's stain thoroughly ingrained in the very fibers of our being? Are we people whose thoughts, words, and deeds are squeaky clean, or people whose minds, tongues, and actions look as though they've spent a lot of time in sin's mud holes? Are we people who are painfully aware of what has gone wrong in our lives, or people who ignore, alibi, and excuse when sin is finally recognized? Let all of us write our own specifics. Sin is there for each one of us - sin from which only God could free us.

It's time again for that inward look at ourselves. And then time to look up at God's amazing love which would reach down so low to sinners like us. What did it cost God to free us from our sins? *"Blood,"* John says. The cross which we position on our altar or place on jewelry chains around our necks was no thing of beauty for our Lord Jesus. It was filled with pain and flecked with blood. No Roman citizen or semi-serious criminal was to be subjected to the shameful, agonizingly slow death which the cross brought about. Such torture was reserved for the worst criminals and for God's own Son.

Even worse were the tortures of hell. All of the bitter dregs which the world's cup of sin contained were his to drain. All the pains of hell, which were sin's wages, were his to collect. Who can describe the suffering which washed wave after wave over him on Good Friday? Only the devils and the damned in hell can begin to understand his anguished cry, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mark 16:34).

And yet there Jesus hung on that accursed cross, held by a force greater than metal nails and human hatred. It was love that took him to the cross, and it was love that kept him there - love which only a gracious God could ever display ... love which he did display for each one of us. It's time again to marvel at such love - a love that would ungrudgingly sacrifice so much a love that would willingly suffer so much.

To be free from sin's punishment would be gain enough. But there's more! John says that because of all of this we are now God's *"kingdom."* We are royalty. We share God's treasures, carry God's name, and look forward to our own room in his heavenly palace. And we are also his *"priests,"* John says. Without hindrance or fear we can go to him, bringing our biggest concerns and our best offerings. With willing hearts, we can also go *for* him, representing him and relating his love wherever he places us in his world. What an exalted position and awesome responsibility are ours! What divine love that would raise us that high!

On the 5th of this month it will be Lent again - Ash Wednesday time to raise our eyes heavenward and to marvel anew at God's love for us and the indescribable blessings we enjoy because of that love. I pray that we all will by faithfully attending our Sunday worship services and our midweek Lenten Vesper worship services. *"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father - to him be glory and power forever and ever!"*

Blessed by the love of Jesus,

Pastor Terry

