

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Not Your Doing”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 18, 2012

2 Chronicles 36:14–17; 19–23; Psalm 137:1–6; Ephesians 2:4–10; John 3:14–21

Gracious God, unstop our ears so that we might hear clearly Your Word this day. Amen.

This is the Fourth Sunday of Lent, and we are asked to celebrate and rejoice over it. We are mid-way in Lent, and historically, the church has asked us to rejoice on this particular day. We are not in the custom of following with the same level of rigorousness the Lenten discipline of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer as “back in the day,” but nonetheless, we have great reason and, in a real spontaneous sense, a great motivation to rejoice. Each of the scriptures you have heard today capture, from one perspective or another, this notion of salvation, redemption, whatever word you want to use to describe the new creation that we are in Christ Jesus as gift. Each reading captures this theme. It is most pronounced in Ephesians. Our redemption, our salvation is a pure, undeserved gift.

Let us look at each of the scriptures we’ve heard today and highlight that particular theme. The reading from 2 Chronicles that you heard and the introduction that David Smith gave us gives you some sense of the way in which that particular ending of that book is a summary or a miniature story of salvation. The people of Israel and its leadership were morally bankrupt. They were unfaithful to the covenant that God initiated with them. Even when God, out of his compassion, sent them messengers and prophets to get them to turn around their ways, their evil ways, they would not listen. They mocked and defiled the prophets themselves. So

their wickedness became so intense and so heavy that it collapsed around them, and they fell into the hands of the Babylonians who destroyed their city, destroyed their young people, and led them into exile and into hopelessness.

As that story ends with the fall of Jerusalem, the second book of Chronicles concludes with this good news: An unlikely savior arises from the compassion and the generosity and the immeasurable goodness of our God. This foreigner, this Gentile, Cyrus of Persia, announces that the Lord, the God of heaven, is given to him all the kingdoms of the earth and has charged him with the task of building a house, a temple at Jerusalem. He says, “Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up.” (2 Chronicles 36:23)

The Gospel text that we just heard is a familiar one—so familiar, in fact, that sometimes, I think it loses some of its impact because we see it on signs at games of sport and on the helmet of Tim Tebow and all the rest of the ways in which this particular “3:16” ends up being a cultural reflection of evangelistic piety. I’m sure more unchurched people, people who have never read the Bible, at least know this particular quotation from John: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.” What message does this particular text teach us in the Nicodemus story in Chapter 3? It speaks of the undeserved love of God, where God intervenes very concretely and practically into our history through the gift of Jesus Christ to the world, to the whole world.

And then the *pièce de résistance* and I am sure Allen can do a better job at this than me, since his book with Joe Harvard on Ephesians is worth reading. I know many of you have it. I encourage you to read the chapter that speaks to this particular section of Ephesians. It is classic, and for those of you who are aware of the watchwords of the Protestant Reformation, you are aware of the fact that it is faith alone, grace alone, rooted in the scriptures alone, that allow us to appreciate the wonderful, gracious gift of God in our lives.

What does the message of Ephesians teach us? It teaches us that implications of this message of salvation are rooted in the fundamental truth that we don’t deserve it. We don’t merit it, we don’t achieve it, and we don’t earn it. But the truth, rooted

in all Christian faith, emphasized by the Reform tradition in particular, is this marvelous, heartwarming truth that we are a people gifted with salvation, based upon God's giving and not our deserving.

But in the act of this gift given by grace alone, there is, at the same time, a "transformation" that is expected of us as a people who have received it. God calls. God converts. God opens our eyes, as you heard in the Nicodemus story that leads us into the light. God unstops our ears. God is the source of all grace that leads us to transformation. It is precisely God's munificence, God's magnificence, this whole reality of his overflowing love, his unconditional commitment to us, that we are liberated and freed to do good works and to do good deeds.

That is why I think the Letter to the Ephesians is a marvelous summary of Christian life because the first three chapters deal with who we are in Christ Jesus. I think this particular verse from Chapter 2, verse 8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" summarizes who we are as the new creation, God's gift to us. In the very last verse of this particular chapter, this selection we just heard read, Paul says, "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 (Ephesians 2:10).

In other words, there are some expectations here, and if you read Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of Ephesians, he goes into what I would call a series of challenges to us. Since you are a new creation, since you have been gifted with a life of God in Christ Jesus, act like it! Be patient, be kind, be generous, be loving, and be selfless. Work out your problems with one another. As Christ Jesus healed, so you heal. As he forgave, so you forgive. As he loved so fully the world, so must you.

This is an apt message for times in which we live because our world is broken. There are wars and rumors of wars, there are small regimes that are constantly in civil strife with their people in Africa and the Middle East. There are the economic struggles that are world-wide. People are looking for work. There are world hunger issues. You know the challenges we face, and I believe, as a Christian people, that as God so loved the world and sent us his only begotten son to save it, this same,

the Lord Jesus, has loved us and has sent us to be his representatives and his ambassadors in a world that, through the gift-given, we have been liberated and freed up to do good works. We can transform the world by our acts of justice, our acts of compassion, and our acts of reconciliation. I invite you to reflect on this fundamental truth that we just heard. Revel in it. But don't allow it simply to be a heartwarming truth that you know is God's gift to you, but allow it to be a moment of conversion that will transform your lives, that will allow you to be a converted people to live out, as Paul says, "a new way of life," because of the gift of grace you have received.