

## **Message for August 14, 2022**

**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**

**Mark 8:27-33**

Max Lucado is one of my favourite authors and he recalls this episode from his university days in his book, "God Came Near".

"You mean to tell me God became a baby and that he was born in a sheep stable?' The one posing the question was puzzled. His thick eyebrows furrowed in doubt and his eyes squinted in caution. He looked as though he'd walked down from one of the adjacent Colorado mountains. And he sounded as though he honestly didn't know if the story he was hearing was a mountain legend or the gospel truth.

'Yes, that is what I mean to say', the lecturer responded.

'And then, after becoming a baby he was raised in a blue-collar home? He never wrote any books or held any offices, yet he called himself the Son of God?'

'That is right.'

'He never traveled outside of his own country, never studied at a university, never lived in a palace, and yet asked to be regarded as the creator of the universe?'

'That's correct.'

'And this crucifixion story ... he was betrayed by his own people? No followers came to his defense? And then he was executed like a common junkyard thief?'

'That's the gist of it.' The authenticity of the questioner didn't allow you to regard him as a cynic, nor to dismiss him as a show-off. To the contrary he seemed nervous about commanding such attention. But his desire to know was just an ounce or two heavier than his discomfort, so he continued.

'And according to what's written, after three days in the grave he was resurrected and made appearances to over five hundred people?'

‘Yes.’

‘And all this was to prove that God loves his people?’

‘Right.’

‘Doesn’t that sound rather ...’ He paused a second, looking for the right adjective. ‘Doesn’t that all sound rather absurd?’

All the heads turned in perfect sync and looked at the lecturer. All the heads that is, except mine. My head was spinning as I was forced to look at Jesus from a new angle. Christianity ... absurd? Jesus on a cross ... absurd? The resurrection ... absurd?

The lecturer’s response was simple. ‘Yes. Yes, I suppose it does sound absurd, doesn’t it?’”

As Lucado went on to write, he didn’t like that answer at all, and we might not like it either. To say that the Christian faith is absurd and silly-sounding? Don’t be absurd! And yet if we think about it, the story of Jesus and even the very Bible itself may well sound rather absurd or silly to those without faith or who have never heard it before. Indeed the apparent absurdity of it all is borne out in both of this morning’s scripture passages.

The event described in today’s first passage happened back at the very dawn of recorded history. Abram was 99 years old when God told him that he was going to be the father or ancestor of many nations. As proof of this, God said that Abram’s wife Sarah, despite her old age, was going to bear a son. As further proof of all this, God also gave Abram a new name; no longer would he be called Abram, from now on he would be called Abraham which when translated means “exalted father”. And so the story of salvation, the chain of events leading up to Christ, began. It began with God telling an elderly couple that despite the seeming impossibility of it all, they would have a child of their own. But what was Abraham’s initial response to this news?

He laughed. As he pointed out, he was almost 100 years old and Sarah was ninety! How could they possibly have a child at their age? God said that he was going to be the father of many nations? Why he couldn’t imagine being the father of even one child! The whole thing was laughable! But while laughter

greeted the beginning of the salvation story, anger and denial greeted its predicted climax.

Towards the end of his earthly ministry Jesus asked the disciples about who the people thought he was. They answered that some people thought that he was the great prophet Elijah returned, while yet others thought that he was John the Baptist raised from the dead. Jesus then put his disciples on the spot by asking them what they thought. "You are the Christ", said Peter. Jesus told him that he was right and then went on to talk about what sort of Christ or Messiah he was. He concluded by telling the disciples that contrary to popular expectations, as the Messiah he was going to be rejected and killed. On the third day though he would be raised from the dead. But what was Peter's response to this? In effect, he told Jesus not to be absurd because such things could not and would not happen to the Messiah! Jesus' response was to tell Peter off.

Laughter then greeted the beginning of the story of God's salvation and denial greeted its predicted climax. Both Abraham's and Peter's response was to say, "don't be absurd". Lest we be too harsh on them though, how many people today respond to Christ and the gospel with laughter or denial? "You Christians say that God so loved the world that he gave his only son ... don't be silly! Why would God ever care about me; who and what am I to him? You say that God cares about my aches and pains, my job security, my old age, or whatever else? It's laughable and can't possibly be true!" How many people even deny the salvation story? They insist that there is no god, and that the Bible is all make believe. There never was a man named Jesus and even if there was, he must have been mentally ill! Imagine going around saying that we should love everyone, never mind saying that he was the Son of God! And then to say that after his death he was brought back to life and lives forevermore, and that we shall too? Truly when we think about it, the story of salvation may well sound rather absurd. Max Lucado certainly realized the apparent absurdity of it all. To return to what he wrote:

"Why God did it is absolutely absurd. Think about it. It was a fiasco. Even the holiest of heroes sometimes forgot whose side they were on. Some of the scenarios in the Bible look more like the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor than stories for Vacation Bible School. Remember these characters?

Aaron. Right hand man to Moses. Witness of the plagues. Member of the 'Red Sea Riverbed Expedition'. Holy priest of God. But if he was so saintly, what is he doing leading the Israelites in fireside aerobics in front of the golden calf?

The sons of Jacob. The fathers of Israel. Great grandsons of Abraham. Yet, if they were so special, why were they gagging their younger brother and sending him to Egypt?

David. The man after God's own heart. The King's king. The giant-slayer and songwriter. He's also the guy whose glasses got steamy as a result of a bath on a roof.

Adam adorned in fig leaves and stains of forbidden fruit. Moses throwing both a staff and a temper tantrum. King Saul looking into a crystal ball for the will of God.

These are the chosen ones of God? These are the ones who were to carry out God's mission? It's easy to see the absurdity. Why didn't he give up? It is inexplicable. It doesn't have a drop of logic nor a thread of rationality."

So writes Lucado, and yet there is an explanation for it all. Lucado knows it and so too do we. The answer and explanation for the story of salvation is quite simply this; the love of God for us and all of his children. And as we all well know from watching others or even from our own first-hand experience, love is not always logical or rational. Love doesn't always make sense. At times love even seems to be foolish, silly, and even absurd to those who aren't experiencing it. Even so, what it all comes down to is love. The entire Bible from beginning to end is a love story. It is the story of God's love for his creation and all therein. It is the story of God's love for Abraham who greeted the beginning of the salvation story with laughter. It is the story of God's love for Peter who greeted the climax with denial. The Bible is the story of God's love for each one of us too. God's love and God's salvation; we may greet them with laughter and we may even deny that they exist, yet they are always ours for the asking. God's love and God's salvation; as absurd or unbelievable as they may sound, they are what the Bible, our faith, our church, and our very lives as Christ's disciples are all about.

## Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer this summer morning.

We thank you for the goodness, variety, and beauty of your creation. We thank you that you have called us into existence and that we are here, a part of it. We thank you for what this season means for so many people; a break from school or work, and an opportunity to live life at a slower pace.

We thank you for your love that comes into our lives in ways other than through your creation, through such as our families and all the people whom we love and who love us.

We thank you for your very self; that you are a God of love. We thank you for your Word given to us through the scriptures.

We thank you for your love as revealed to us through the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of your Son. Truly your love, mercy, goodness, and compassion are over all that you have made. We pray that you will help us to never forget this. Help us to love, even as we are loved.

We pray this day for everyone who, for whatever reason, feels unneeded, unwanted, and unloved. We pray for the sake of all who are ill, and all who mourn. So often so many of us act as if the pandemic is over and that life has returned to normal, and yet it hasn't. We pray for the staff in our hospitals as they struggle, physically and mentally, to provide the much-needed care. We pray too for the members of the various levels of government as they wrestle with how to improve our medical system.

We remember and pray this day for all of your children who lack even the most basic medical care, as well as those who hunger, have no place to call home or, for whatever reason, live in fear.

We once again pray for the people of Ukraine and especially for those who live in the occupied parts of that country. We pray too for Israel and the occupied territories after the latest flare up of tensions and violence. We pray for peace and justice, not only in those parts of the world but also throughout the whole of your creation. To this end we pray for the work and ministry of your church which, despite her failures and shortcomings, is still your Son's body here on earth.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen