

May God breathe in us the fire of love to bring us alive
and give warmth to the world. Amen.

When we read through the Bible passages for today
it sounds like we're back in Lent.

The reading from Acts talks about sin. 1 John talks about sin. Luke talks about sin.
I had to stop and check that these were, in fact, the right readings!

Well of course, just because we are in the Easter season
it doesn't mean that we are somehow magically absolved from all bad things
or given special powers of goodness.

All of this talk about sin is not inappropriate, but just unexpected.

The theme of this morning's readings is sin,
sin as separation from God and sin as separation from our true self.

In the Gospel reading, we heard one of several accounts
of Jesus appearing to the disciples after his crucifixion.

In fact, this story from Luke is very similar to the one from the Gospel of John
we heard last week.

Jesus appears suddenly to the disciples.

He says "Peace be with you" and he shows them his wounds
to convince them that he has risen from the dead.

The big difference between the 2 accounts is that in Luke,
Jesus asks them for something to eat. Great move.

We all know that ghosts aren't supposed to be able to eat food
so when Jesus ate a piece of fish and it disappeared down his throat,
that was the clincher.

We can imagine the disciples watching him carefully as he ate,
to see if in fact he swallowed the fish and didn't just tuck it away in his cheek.

It's kind of funny really.

Jesus said all kinds of lofty and inspirational things and showed them his wounds
but it took a piece of fish to seal the deal.

It made me think of the cartoons of Casper the Friendly Ghost from my childhood
where the bad ghosts were gluttons and would eat piles of food
which would go right through them and fall onto the floor.

Because this is, at least according to the Gospel of Luke,

Jesus' last appearance on earth, these are his final words to the disciples.

And what does he say to them?

"Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer
and to rise from the dead on the third day,

and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

You are witnesses to these things.”

These are the words that the author of Luke wants us to remember as our reason for being and our call to action, so let’s look at them a little more closely.

First, “It is written…”

It is written in Luke means this is official, this is important, Yo dudes, listen up!

Next, “repentance and forgiveness of sin is to be proclaimed in his name throughout the world.”

This is the world’s only hope, our only way out of the continual cycle of offense and revenge, of insult and retaliation, of wrong piled upon wrong.

Very often we read this as a private and individual way.

If I, Nina, repent of my sins, then God will forgive me of my sins.

That’s one way to hear it but not the only way.

There are my sins and there are our sins and we seem to be awash in the latter at the moment.

We don’t need to be convinced of the reality of communal sins.

They are proclaimed to us every day – shootings, injustices, climate change.

In the face of all our own shortcomings, we are encouraged, no, commanded to forgive the sins of others,

to seek reconciliation instead of revenge,

to look for life in the valley of the shadow of death, and in an empty tomb.

And finally – “You are witnesses to these things.”

We gather on Sunday mornings, here and in our homes,

to be reminded of our story, to support one another in our lives of faith,

to receive forgiveness and to learn how to offer forgiveness,

to gather strength from scripture and song,

and to be inspired to share our story and our strength with the world around us.

As Martin Luther put it in the Small Catechism,

“We are called, gathered, empowered, and sent.”

We are called by God, gathered by the church in Jesus’ name,

empowered by the Holy Spirit and sent out, sent out.

If we go back and look at the end of the reading in Acts,

the author describes repentance as a turning to God

and we can understand that turning very literally.

If we are walking down a path that is hurting ourselves or others,

then God is inviting us to do a U-turn,
to pivot 180 degrees in the opposite direction.
Using the vocabulary of the mystics,
sin is when we act out of our false self and not our true self.
Sin is when we act out of and respond to the apparent needs of our ego
and that ego, in the words of Ken Wilber,
is a “puny, finite, limiting and lacerating identity that is nothing other than hell.
(Sin) is a horrible case of mistaken identity.
We have forgotten who and what we are,
transcendental selves plugged straight into the Spirit...” (*Entering the Castle, C. Myss*)

One of the best descriptions of how we can get lost along the way
is the book of Ecclesiastes.
The author is searching for the meaning of life – searching everywhere –
and he keeps failing to find it.
He carries out tests to discover where meaning can be found.
He looks for meaning in pleasure with the result that he begins to hate life.
He looks for it in his work and begins to envy the dead.
He seeks it in wealth and every bit of meaning seems to escape like the wind.
He seeks it in wisdom but finds only drudgery and vexation.
He becomes the expert on dead ends because he’s willing
to go in every possible direction to find what he is looking for.
And that’s not a bad way to go about it –
to be so endlessly curious about truth,
that we try all kinds of different paths to get there,
that we won’t stop until we find it.
To be willing to turn around again and again until we find the path
that really does lead somewhere – the path of life.

The passage in Acts ends with this tantalizing offer,
“Repent therefore and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out,
so that times of refreshment may come from the presence of the Lord.”
Refreshment – I think of satisfying things like a glass of water when we’re thirsty
or a massage when our muscles ache
and then I think past those things to the lifegiving refreshment from God,
a refreshment that is so real and substantial
that water and massages mean little.
The word for refreshment in Greek also means to recover one’s breath.
And that just sounded so wonderful.
Much of our lives are lived breathlessly –

trying to catch up, trying to do it all, pack it all in,
trying to satisfy some goal that our parents or society set in front of us
until we look back and see how much time we spent on these things
and how little they meant.

Covid is a disease of breathlessness but paradoxically
even those did not get sick and who barely left our houses,
have felt equally breathless with uncertainty and alarm.

My primary memory of my daughter's first year,
which I, ironically, took off from work so that I could be with her,
was running around Denver, trying to run as many errands as I could!
Now I can't tell you what any of those errands accomplished.

1Do you feel as if you can never quite catch your breath?

Do you move from one alarming emotion to the next,
at the beck and call of fear or sadness or hurt?

God is the breath that gives us life.

God is longing to give us the refreshment that only God can give.

As we breathe God in and out, we can return to our ancient lodging,
to the house, as Meister Eckhart said,
that we have never left, our house of spiritual belonging.