

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Rogation Sunday – Year B

**RCL Readings** – Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

**ACNA Readings** – Acts 11:19-30 or Isaiah 45:11-13, 18-25; Psalm 33:(1-8, 18-22); I John 4:7-21; John 15:9-17

**Seasonal Introduction.** Eastertide leads to Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit. But before the Holy Spirit was sent, Jesus had to first ascend.<sup>1</sup> The 6th Sunday of Easter is also known as Rogation Sunday. Rogation (from the Latin *rogare*, to ask) Sunday opens a three day fast, Monday-Wednesday directly prior to the Feast of the Ascension (which is always on a Thursday).<sup>2</sup> During this fast, petitions are made to the Lord asking for his merciful protection from the violence of nature and for his blessing that the crops be fruitful.<sup>3</sup> God doesn't only provide us with spiritual intercession as Jesus stands at the right hand of the Father but also daily, physical bread. A people who neglect to credit the LORD of creation, no matter how urban they have become, with the necessities He provides in food and health do so at their own spiritual peril.

**Common Theme.** As we remember God's blessing on all the earth and bring our supplication to Him for continued mercy we remember that God loved all the world. God is the creator of all and all who love Him, all who abide in Him, all who obey Him are invited to be His people (even be called His friends and children). God truly wants to restore and renew His relationship with those He loves—both Jew and Gentile.

**Hebraic Context.** In Jewish tradition the earth is alive. Not in terms of sentience or that the world is somehow a gargantuan thinking individual but the earth reacts to other things (obviously plants will react to the sun, wind, and rain, for instance) including human behaviour. In Leviticus 18:28, Moses warned the Israelites, "And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you." Moses did not say that God would remove

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<sup>1</sup> This is why, during the Season of Easter, it is common practice to read the sacred history from the book of Acts. While Luke's historical discourse is often called the *Acts of the Apostles*, it could just as easily have been called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. As the season of Passover and Easter turns to the season of Shavuot and Pentecost we can see the meaning behind Jesus' words, "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you." (John 16:7)

<sup>2</sup> The fast was officially instituted in the First Council of Orléans in 511, although such fasts were practiced prior to this period.

<sup>3</sup> There are arguments that this followed a pagan tradition but the ancient Jewish calendar also reflects both agricultural and spiritual precedent for petitions, fasts, and feasts. Counting the *Omer*, 'sheaf', is a tradition that developed from Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16, "You shall count seven weeks. Begin to count the seven weeks from the time the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*, or *Pentecost*) to the LORD your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the LORD your God blesses you." If God is the one that blesses us with grain, indeed, all blessings, it seems appropriate to petition for his grace in both fasting and feasting.

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the people from the land, but that the land itself would react and force the people to move.<sup>4</sup> And the land itself would enjoy the Sabbaths while Israel was outside the land (Leviticus 26:34-35).

At the Fall in the Garden of Eden, when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, the earth was cursed though it had done nothing wrong—the earth had not eaten the fruit. Paul said in Romans 8:20-22 that “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time”. The earth is not awaiting its destruction, rather it is awaiting its redemption.

The earth wants to function as God created it—it waits to be renewed.<sup>5</sup> If you like the smell of roses now, then just wait until the Messiah comes and then roses will release fragrances like they were intended. If you like the taste of oranges now, just wait until the Messiah comes and then oranges will never taste better. As Jesus says, He will make all things new! Because the earth responds to our behaviour, then it is incumbent upon us, even now, to tend the earth with love and care, seeking the Lord's blessing for the work of our hands until He restores it fully.<sup>6</sup>

**Acts 10:44-48.** Acts 10 is the watershed moment in the history of the early church in which salvation is brought to the Gentiles through the visible outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Gentiles in question are not pagans unfamiliar with the God of Israel. Cornelius, his relatives, and close friends (Acts 10:24) are god-fearers, gentiles who are already attracted to monotheism and believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Following a vision from an angel of the Lord, Cornelius had asked Peter to speak in his house in Caesarea. As Peter was sharing the good news of God through Jesus the Messiah the Holy

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<sup>4</sup> Although God also declared that He would remove Israel from the land in other passages such as: Leviticus 26:33-39; Deuteronomy 28:63-68; Ezekiel 36:19-20.

<sup>5</sup> The earth does not wait to be destroyed but renewed. The Hebrew for new is חדש (*hadash*). But it is often used in the Scriptures as renewal, restoration, or repair (in modern Hebrew, להתחדש, *l'hithdash*). Psalm 104:30 states, “When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.” In Revelation 21:5, Jesus used the same word that the Septuagint used in Psalm 104:30, “to renew” (καινος) “Behold, I am making all things new” or renewed. It will be as it was supposed to be from the beginning. Likewise in Revelation 21:1, “Then I saw a new (renewed) heaven and a new (renewed) earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...” The first use of “passed away” in the LXX is Genesis 3:19, “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The earth will return to “and it was good” as Jesus renews it.

<sup>6</sup> During Rogation Week we should be reminded, regardless of political beliefs, that the earth God created was good and then was given to man to care for and have dominion over. This world, while groaning, still provides us with many blessings from God. We ought to be thankful in both word and deed as we labour.

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Spirit fell on all those who heard the word.<sup>7</sup> Acts records that “Those of the circumcision who believed were astonished”. Peter and the Jewish believers with him were amazed at what God was doing in front of their eyes. Even though they had a prophetic, Hebraic precedent for this occurrence—Joel prophesied that God would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh (which was quoted by Peter in Acts 2 only a little before this event)—it was still unexpected and amazing to witness.

Perhaps it was astonishing to learn that “all flesh” actually really meant both Jews and Gentiles! But with God’s clear inclusion of these men and women, Peter then commanded them to be baptized. He does not ask if they want to be baptized, there is no altar call or invitation. It is a command! We have received the same command from Jesus to go make disciples, baptize and teach them to obey!

**Psalm 98.**<sup>8</sup> The psalm begins by commanding us to sing a new song to the Lord. The Hebraic perspective on the meaning of ‘a new song’ is that there is something fresh and exciting that the Lord has done or is about to do which is then preserved and remembered through the medium of music and poetry. The Magnificat, or Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-55, is a New Testament example of creating a ‘new song’ once the Lord had performed something dynamic in the world, in that case the incarnation of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the literal text does not say they believed in Jesus or accepted Him as Lord and Saviour, but they did receive the Holy Spirit. Similar to Acts 8:36, 38, with the omission of Acts 8:37 in early manuscripts, Luke does not appear to be concerned with this very important (for most of us) detail in these two stories. Various Christian commentators fall over themselves to explain how the hearers all made internal, quiet, and heartfelt admissions of faith, which is an exegesis from silence. (What Luke does record is that Cornelius already was obedient to God, feared Him, and worshiped Him.)

Not only did the Holy Spirit come upon Gentiles, thus testifying to the fact that the good news was available to both Jews and Gentiles, but He fell prior to a public declaration of faith and/or baptism. There is no Biblical formula for receiving the gift of the Spirit. In the book of Acts we encounter narratives in which the Holy Spirit was given prior to baptism (as witnessed here), sometimes after baptism (Acts 2:38), and sometimes an extra laying on of hands was required (Acts 8). The Holy Spirit isn’t a formula or a powered up battery, He is part of the Trinity. One should never try and put the Holy Spirit into a box and create legal formulas for how He works.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 98 is the only psalm whose sole superscription is מְזִמֹּר meaning melody or poem. In most psalms the attribution reads לְמִזְמֹר the melody to someone, for example in Psalm 48 the superscription (which is actually the opening verse) reads לְבָנֵי־קֹרַח melody to the sons of Korah while for psalms of David the first verse will read לְדָוִד melody to David.

<sup>9</sup> What is described as ‘new’ is actually not new in the sense of never having been done or heard before. For example in Mary’s song, which was new, she constantly quoted the Torah and the prophets. When Jesus said “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another...” it was hardly new as Moses had commanded us to love God and our neighbour, and yet it still was new and fresh—it’s both, and.

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Part of the new song was that the Lord's righteousness and salvation were made known to all the nations of the world. This is not to diminish the steadfast love and faithfulness God has for His people Israel, but acknowledges the kingship of God is over all the earth.<sup>10</sup> All the nations of the earth are invited to respond to the salvation of God by praising Him, shouting and singing joyfully.

Creation itself joins in the adoration of the divine. The sea roars, the rivers clap their hands and the hills are delighted to behold the righteousness of God. While these are metaphors and images of seemingly non-sentient objects doing animated things might seem odd, there is the Hebraic understanding that Creation is alive and more than capable of praising God.<sup>11</sup>

**I John 5:1-6.** The term "born of God" is found primarily in John's epistle. In its simplest and most common form, "born of" γεννάω (*gennaō*), simply describes fathering—such as Matthew 1 (Abraham begat Isaac, etc). Faith in Jesus is portrayed as an intimate familial relationship and not a dry conviction of dogmatic belief. The common ground we all have as believers in Jesus is, while we are not in a literal biological relationship to God or to each other, we are in a relationship that is just as intimate and special as a biological one, all wrapped around the action of love.

Love and commandments are contrary to so many in this world, but John tells us that obedience in the commands of God and love of God and man go hand in hand. Perhaps one of the misunderstandings surrounding the commandments is that we think it places a burden on us. Poor exegesis and ignorance concerning God's instructions is part of the problem but the deception of the world also leads us to think that obedience to God is contrary to love.<sup>12</sup>

Faith has been discussed before as an action and not a series of doctrines and dogmas and certainly not a nebulous hope.<sup>13</sup> Likewise love in the Scriptures is not simply an emotion nor a feeling but also an action. "God so loved the world" that He did something—He sent the Son.

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<sup>10</sup> As we have mentioned previously, salvation and redemption in the Psalms are often universal in scope. Universal, not in the sense that everyone and everything is saved, but that salvation is offered to all the world irrespective of ethnicity or position. Interestingly, these universal prayers were sung in Hebrew, by Jewish people, in the Temple in Jerusalem—although we may see foreigners joining in by the time of Acts due to the faithfulness of many Jewish people after the destruction of Solomon's temple (and even some before it).

<sup>11</sup> See Hebraic Context.

<sup>12</sup> Ask a dozen people on the street what love is and you will get at least a dozen different definitions. Sacrifice, the first thing connected to love in the Bible, obedience, and humility aren't likely to be a major component of any of those definitions.

<sup>13</sup> Although, our faith in action is based on specific doctrines—the commandments of God and the deeds of God.

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Anything that comes from God is good.<sup>14</sup> By our faith, our action of obedience to God's commandments, we overcome the deception of the world and proclaim our love of God and the children of God.

The Gospel is counter-cultural. Jesus declared that His yoke was easy and His burden was light. We must not succumb to the hostility of the world, nor to hate, nor to individualism. Rather we “overcome” to genuinely engage in actions of love, compassion, mercy, and grace to each other. These actions of love will be a light that shines in the darkness—for these are not deeds of darkness—and attract people to Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life.

**John 15:9-17.**<sup>15</sup> There are many conditional statements of Jesus in John's gospel that have filled the pages of commentaries for the last two thousand years with questions. God's unconditional love has conditions—what a paradox! God loved a people who did not love Him, but He wants us to abide in His love—not just receive His love but stay in it.<sup>16</sup>

Love is relational and that relationship is described here as abiding in and with Jesus, expressed through the outworking of the commandments. The truest example of that relationship is the Son, who is obedient to the Father. Obedience not only isn't burdensome but it also brings joy.<sup>17</sup>

God really wants us to have a relationship with each other as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have with each other. And so Jesus repeats the “New Commandment” He had given in John 13, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Commentaries put a lot of emphasis on “as I have loved you” as being what is “new”.<sup>18</sup> But just as Jesus provided the ultimate example that loving

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<sup>14</sup> Imagine the world today if we all read the Scriptures and chose to love God with all their heart, soul, and might. There would be no murder or war, no need for locked doors as there would be no thieves, no envy, and where there were the poor, the widow, or the sick there would be neighbours who would insure there was food, comfort, and intercession. That is a world of obedience to the commands of God. It is also far from our own world of fear, pride, and greed.

<sup>15</sup> This passage cannot be divorced from Jesus' previous exposition on the vine and branches where He commands us to abide in Him.

<sup>16</sup> Yet, even if we do not receive His love nor return His love by abiding in Him, it does not mean that every blessing of God's love is removed. The rain still falls, the earth has not dissolved, and God gave the Holy Spirit and the Church to work in the world.

<sup>17</sup> Jesus wasn't upset that He had to keep God's commandments, it continued a relationship that was good. And so, Jesus' command to follow His example shouldn't cause division or accusations against His disciples of legalism. Following His commandments can only help us bear fruit and love one another.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding new, see Hebraic Perspective.

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your friends might mean surrendering your life on their behalf, God has always been the example of love.<sup>19</sup>

God-fearing Jewish listeners of Jesus would not have recognized a faith that did not express itself in behaviours that pleased God and led to holiness—for God is holy and expressed His faithful love through His own behaviour. Disciples, a very well-defined role in Jewish culture, didn’t simply learn the teaching of the master—they were to replicate it (otherwise, they were not true disciples). Jesus, through both metaphor and plain language, said that only through loyalty, as close as a branch connects to the vine, can this relationship be realized.

But this, too, is something we can look forward to in joy and wonder, for Jesus went on to call His disciples “friends”. We are also included as His friends.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, Jesus was quick to return us to the theme of the Vinedresser, Vine, and the branches. The grace of God was shown as Jesus states, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.” It may be a paradox, but I desire to abide in His love and love the brethren!

**Hebraic Perspective.** Throughout the Bible we encounter the word ‘new’ *חָדָשׁ chadash* in different contexts. The word first appears in Exodus 1:8 when a new king arose in Egypt to oppress the Israelites. Some of the many Biblical uses include the psalms calling on us to sing a new song.<sup>21</sup> We also read of new moons in the sacred calendar,<sup>22</sup> and a prophetic new covenant in Jeremiah, new hearts and new spirits in people, and the Lord Himself does a new thing.<sup>23</sup>

In general the Biblical use of the word ‘new’ contrasts against something that went before in the sense of being fresh and renewed. When David asked for a clean heart and right spirit he asked that it be renewed within him. When the calendar talks of ‘new moons’ it is not referring to the literal making of a moon to replace the old one. When God says He will make a new heaven and a new earth He means to renew creation and not destroy it.<sup>24 25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The Trinity has always been in a relationship of love. God wasn’t in some void of thoughtlessness before He decided to create, John 17:24 states that God loved long before the foundation of the world. And God’s nature hasn’t changed, He has shown His love through actions of blessing, redemption, and sacrifice.

<sup>20</sup> This doesn’t mean we can cease calling Him lord, master, and saviour. Just that we can expand the relationship we have with God to include the bonds of friendship. Jesus calls us friends and we are called His friends, that is, if our love is lived out through obedience and we “do whatever I command you”.

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1; Isaiah 42:10

<sup>22</sup> The new moon, and lunar month, is *חֹדֶשׁ (hodesh)*. First seen in Genesis 7:11 in relation to the destruction of the earth by flood (although the same earth remained after the flood).

<sup>23</sup> Jeremiah 31:31; Ezekiel 11:19, 18:31, 36:26; Isaiah 43:19

<sup>24</sup> See Footnote 5.

<sup>25</sup> Scripture, such as the “meek will inherit the earth” would be difficult if it has been destroyed.

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Most of what Jesus taught was rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and was new only in point of emphasis or application. He reaffirmed the teaching of Hebrew Scripture that centralized the Sh'ma as the heart of God: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength". The heart of the Lord never changes, Malachi 3:6 "For I am the Lord, I change not". Yet His mercies are new and fresh every morning. God consistently renews His love for the world, through the new covenant, through Jesus the Messiah and through the renewed people of God that includes both Jews and Gentiles.

**ACNA Readings**

**Acts 11:19-30.** Jesus commanded His disciples to go into all the world and make disciples.<sup>26</sup> However, the early chapters of Acts show that, instead of immediately embarking from Israel to the nations, the disciples remained in Jerusalem following the ascension. It wasn't until serious persecution broke out against the early church that the Jesus movement began to expand around the Roman Empire. And yet in Acts 15 we still find the apostles remaining in Jerusalem. Instead, Acts recorded that it was unnamed Jewish disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene who shared the good news of the Messiah with the 'Hellenists' of Antioch.<sup>27 28</sup>

The initial movement was restricted to the Jewish people, "preaching the word to no one but the Jews only." However, the inclusion of Hellenists appears to not be speaking strictly of Greek Jews here and so, perhaps, this was one of the first successful missions to the Gentiles as a people rather than as individuals.<sup>29</sup> This was accomplished by a combination of what appears to be motivated lay-people, with some guidance from Barnabbas and, later, Paul. It is also likely

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<sup>26</sup> An apostle wasn't a special kind of disciple. Disciples in the time of Jesus were those who learned from and emulated their master. Apostle was a common word for an emissary, someone who was sent out, in Hebrew שליח, a sent one. But Jesus commanded His disciples, "go".

<sup>27</sup> The Antioch mentioned here seems to be Antioch on the Orontes. Antioch was a common name for cities in Asia Minor thanks to Seleucus I, one of Alexander the Great's generals who founded several cities calling them after his father, Antiochus. The modern city of Antioch is located in Turkey. It was a major centre of early Christianity and is the ancestral seat of the Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch.

<sup>28</sup> The Greek word for hellenists here is Ἑλληνιστῆς *ellēnistēs* which is sometimes translated as Greeks, implying them to be Gentiles, but was also used concerning Jews who adopted secular Greek culture.

<sup>29</sup> Antioch became one of the most important Christian centres early in the church. It was there that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians (followers of the anointed one). Barnabbas and Paul started their ministry out of Antioch, which already included God's work among the Gentiles (Acts 15:3). And it was also there that the dispute over circumcision and salvation boiled over. All this almost certainly points towards a large church that included Gentiles (along with local Jewish leaders, brothers and sisters) developing in Antioch.

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that there were already a high number of god-fearers in the region, Gentiles who saw the testimony of their Jewish neighbours and had embraced the God of Israel.<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, this success wasn't an accident. Barnabas was originally from Cyprus and was sent to assist the fledgling community. It's possible that he personally knew some of the leadership from Cyprus (while the apostles would encounter many cultures they'd have to work through). Barnabas then sought out Saul, who he had previously warmly accepted while many remained suspicious of Saul. Saul was also a highly trained Jew from Tarsus, in the diaspora, not far from Antioch. Saul was fluent, not only in the languages of the region, but seemingly also in how to use those languages in a Hellenized Asia Minor. Barnabas understood that Saul would be a great asset to a Jewish-Gentile community. A community like this had never been established before and the believers needed someone who could operate in both Greek and Hebrew worlds. For both Saul and Barnabas this would be an excellent preparation ground for their future ministry.

As the community in Antioch grew it attracted some believers endowed with the gift of prophecy. One of them, Agabus, gave a terrible prophecy that famine would take place throughout the world.<sup>31</sup> Agabus' prophecy about a famine could easily result in fear and panic. But instead, it resulted in a demonstration of the true faith of the believers in Antioch through love and generosity.

**Isaiah 45:11-13, 18-25.** The importance of God and man is highlighted here through the ever-present reminder of creation. Isaiah emphasized that God is the creator—the first cause, prime mover, and founder of all things. Man, on the other hand, regardless of their wealth or power, can only bow down.<sup>32</sup> But creation isn't simply to prove God's power, God chose to

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<sup>30</sup> Cornelius is only one example of a Gentile who decided to follow the God of Israel, there are many examples of others throughout the Bible as well as literary and archaeological evidence that Gentiles became God-fearers.

<sup>31</sup> Agabus roughly translates to grasshopper (locust) and might have not been his real name but rather a pseudonym regarding the disasters he prophesied about, such as famine and the arrest of Paul. Agabus was a resident of Jerusalem and, according to Orthodox hagiography, one of the 70 disciples (along with Luke) that Jesus sent out in Luke 10. Coming from Jerusalem, Orthodox tradition also states that Agabus was likely present at Pentecost in Acts 2.

<sup>32</sup> In the Talmud *Sanhedrin* 38a.13, the question was asked on why man was created last, "He was created on Shabbat eve so that if a person becomes haughty, God can say to him: 'The mosquito preceded you in the acts of Creation, as you were created last.'"



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create something He considered good and would bless.<sup>33</sup> The Bible started with a garden and it ends with a heavenly city with a garden.

This does not mean we worship the creation or make it into gods.<sup>34</sup> Regarding these things, there are no other gods (even though man still carries them around).<sup>35</sup> For Isaiah, there is a creator and that matters because then we have obligations to the one who made everything.

One of those responsibilities is to care for the creation. Creation itself is a proclamation of the existence of the divine. There are no other gods, nothing else comes close to being godlike: institutions and political theories are not divine but fallible and governments cannot bring salvation. Nor can human philosophies procure for us the enlightenment, for without absolutes there is no such thing as truth or morality (for they become subjective to individuals and the tyranny of the majority). But there is a God that dictates truth and morality.

Isaiah prophesied that at the conclusion of time there will come a day when; “every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.” All of creation will acknowledge the creator! Why wait? Forgetting this important aspect of the Lord cannot be helpful to either individuals or a society. Once we lose sight that there is ‘one above us’ we often lose the capacity to process beyond ourselves and become hedonistic both as individuals and as a society.

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<sup>33</sup> Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus and the Apostles, stated, “And God, not being urged on by any prompter (for who else could there have been to prompt him?) but guided by his own sole will, decided that it was fitting to benefit with unlimited and abundant favours a nature which, without the divine gift, was unable to itself to partake of any good thing; but he benefits it, not according to the greatness of his own graces, for they are illimitable and eternal, but according to the power of that which is benefited to receive his graces. For the capacity of that which is created to receive benefits does not correspond to the natural power of God to confer them; since his powers are infinitely greater, and the thing created being not sufficiently powerful to receive all their greatness would have sunk under it, if he had not measured his bounty, allotting to each, in due proportion, that which was poured upon it.” (*On the Creation*)

<sup>34</sup> Even in the times of Jesus, there was already thought towards Theism. “For some men, admiring the world itself rather than the Creator of the world, have represented it as existing without any maker, and eternal; and as impiously as falsely have represented God as existing in a state of complete inactivity, while it would have been right on the other hand to marvel at the might of God as the creator and father of all...” (Philo, *On the Creation*)

<sup>35</sup> Though man tries to make themselves as a god, we are not. In the Talmud *Sanhedrin* 38a.13, the question is asked on why man was created last, “Adam the first man was created on Shabbat eve at the close of the six days of Creation... So that the heretics will not be able to say that the Holy One, Blessed by He, had a partner, i.e. Adam, in the acts of Creation.”

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**Psalm 33.**<sup>36</sup> The Psalm does not start with the many things God has done but rather simply states that the correct thing for us to do is praise, give thanks, and sing a new song to God. Only afterwards does it start to relay the reasons we are to sing a new song. “Sing to Him a new song” does not mean we have to sit down and write out a new melody, harmonies, and lyrics each day. Nor does it mean that we can't sing the hymns, psalms, and worship songs that are so precious to us.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, although God was merciful to us yesterday, last week, and the decade before, the mercies of God are new every morning.

Psalm 33 reminds the worshipper that the whole earth receives the goodness of God, not just the land or people of Israel. The greatness of God is expressed in all the wonder of His creation. Paul alludes to this in Romans 1:20 when he says, “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” The mystery and majesty of creation is as obvious to Gentiles as it is to the Jewish people.

God has chosen a nation as His heritage and if He is their God and they are His people they are truly blessed. But God's righteousness, justice, and His creative power is over all nations. All the earth should fear God. And not only the nations, but the hearts of all men, for He “sees all the children of man” and “the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him”.<sup>38</sup> God is intimately involved with people at the individual level as well as with creation and nations. So let us sing a new song every morning as His steadfast love is on us.

**I John 4:7-21.** One of the primary characteristics in the life of the believer is love. Paul described it as the greatest characteristic along with faith and hope. John reminds us of this important aspect in the behaviour of a follower of Jesus: “anyone who does not love does not know God.”<sup>39</sup> The command to love is reciprocal, we are commanded to love because we have

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<sup>36</sup> Psalm 33 is one of 34 Psalms that do not bear a title or superscription in the Hebrew, although many of these do start with hallelujah as a prelude to the rest of the Psalm. The Septuagint attributes Psalm 33 to David (as only 17 Psalms are without superscription in the LXX).

<sup>37</sup> When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we never pray the same prayer we prayed the day or week before but rather we pray it completely anew. Just as when we tell our loved ones that we do, in fact, love them we are not repeating something old but declaring something new. Reading Psalm 23 or singing Amazing Grace should remind me of God's amazing providence, grace, and mercy and, as I direct my adoration towards God in response, it is a new song.

<sup>38</sup> Many of the Psalms (and all Hebraic parables) aren't only for Israel but open to any who hear. God is the creator of all and, as we remember God's constant provision of food through the earth, He blesses all with rain and all that gives life. Beyond even that, God's desire to redeem, as shown in His historical activity (though much of it is in and through Israel), isn't limited to Israel.

<sup>39</sup> I think it's worth repeating this statement, “Anyone who does not love does not know God.” On the day of judgment all will be gathered before the throne of the Son of Man. Some will have shown love and some will not. There will be some who believe in God but did not show love, to these the Son of Man will say, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Rogation Sunday – Year B

been loved, not to earn love but to maintain the loving relationship.<sup>40</sup> The question then is what is love?

Love is not an emotion. It's not something you fall into by accident. Love is not something you feel only on Valentine's Day or when you feel warm and fuzzy after too much chocolate. Love is a choice, which is why it can be commanded. Moses commanded Israel to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might" and also to "love your neighbour." If love was an uncontrolled feeling or emotion then this command would make no sense.

In this Epistle, John commands us to love our brother and sister as a response to the love that God has for us. The Lord spoke clearly to Moses during the exodus and said; "You cannot see my face, for no man shall see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20). John reiterates this statement again here that "No one has seen God at any time". And while that is certainly true, God can be seen in us. How? God abides in us when we practice the action of love, which was demonstrated by the Father who sent His Son. The pinnacle of God's love was the cross and Jesus' resurrection. Our response to the love of God is to bear fruit with yet more love. As John says, "This is how love is made complete among us."

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We should examine ourselves and we should know if we abide in Him and we should encourage our beloved to do the same. One of the primary characteristics in the life of the believer is love, for without love we prove we aren't truly among God's disciples.

<sup>40</sup> John demonstrates the relationship in I John 4:7 by opening his appeal and challenge by stating "Αγαπητοί αγαπῶμεν" 'Beloved, love'.