

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 1, 2020**

ROOTED AND ESTABLISHED (3)

Colossians 2: 6-7; Mark 4:1-9

Before getting into the Scriptures, I want to take a few moments to talk about Lent, which began this past Wednesday. Like the season of Advent, in which we remember and celebrate the birth of our Savior in the little town of Bethlehem, and look ahead to His second coming still in the future, Lent is a time of special focus for Christians – in the case of Lent, on two defining moments that remind us of the purpose of Jesus’ coming to us: His suffering and death on the cross on Good Friday, and His resurrection from the dead on Easter morning. However, as Sarah Phillips, a writer at Crosswalk.com, points out: “(U)nlike the childlike joy associated with the season of Advent, with its eager anticipation of the precious baby Jesus, Lent is an intensely penitential time as we examine our sinful nature and return to the God we have ... hurt time and again” through our rebellion and unbelief. “Lent is also an opportunity to contemplate what our Lord really did for us on the Cross – and it wasn’t pretty. But ultimately ... Lent ... points us to the hope of the Resurrection” which is ours in and through Christ.

The tradition of Lent goes back at least to the 6th century AD and is observed mainly in the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox churches, and some Protestant churches that follow a liturgical calendar. Traditionally, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday (which was February 26 this year) and continues for 40 days, not counting Sundays, ending on the day before Easter (which is April 12 this year).

If you wonder what the word Lent means or where it came from, it was not originally a religious word. You won’t find it in the Bible. It comes from an old English word *lencten*, which simply means “lengthen” (just like it sounds). In general terms, it refers to the springtime when the days are getting longer. Church leaders took the word and made it the name for this special season of both personal and communal reflection, repentance, self-denial, and service in preparation for the commemoration of Jesus’ death on Good Friday and His resurrection from the dead on Easter.

In some Christian traditions, Lent is a time when believers typically “give something up” as a sign of their devotion to the Lord Jesus. Usually it involves fasting from certain foods or activities. In our church, we don’t put as much emphasis on “giving something up for Lent” as some churches do. Giving something up for Lent is not a bad thing. It can be a very good thing, as long as you do it for the right reason. A guy I know jokingly said he was going to give up liver for Lent ☺. I don’t know if that would be a sacrifice for you. It would *not* be a sacrifice for me!

Giving up something for Lent can be beneficial, as long as you aren’t doing it because you think it will make God like you better or love you more (He is already very, very fond of you!), or because you think it will make you look more spiritual in the eyes of other people. (A reputation for being spiritual and \$5 will get you a latte at Starbucks!) But if you do it because you genuinely want to show God your love and gratitude and devotion, and because you really want

to focus more intensely on your relationship with God, giving up something for Lent can be a good spiritual discipline.

Or, as I suggested in the Church Newsletter this past week, you may want to take something on during Lent that expresses your love for God. That "something" may be helping out in some ministry where you know there is a need. It may be more regular and consistent Worship attendance, or participation in Sunday School or other church activities. It may be a more disciplined and consistent practice of daily Bible reading and prayer. It may be increasing your giving to the church, to other Christian ministries, and to people you know who are in need. Remembering the sacrifice of Jesus for us can be a powerful motivator to sacrifice in order to bless others.

There is much more I could say about the meaning of Lent and the blessings to be gained from it. Let me just say this: I pray that you will make it your aim to draw closer to the Lord Jesus during Lent as we meditate on His suffering, death, and resurrection, and the benefits we receive from them. I pray that you will make the most of every opportunity the Lord gives you to grow spiritually and to bless others in the name of Jesus. I pray that you will keep on keeping on – and encourage one another to keep on keeping on – as followers of Jesus. I pray that during Lent and beyond, you will live your life *coram deo*: Before the face of God, under His sovereign and gracious rule, and unto His glory. Amen to that? Amen.

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Now, let's look together at God's Word as we find it once again in Colossians 2:6-7, along with Jesus' Parable of the Sower and the Soils in Mark 4:1-9. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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I thought about giving these messages the title "So Then," since that is how Paul begins Colossians 2:6. "So then," he says, "just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord," this is how you are to continue to live as Christ's followers. So then, this is what you are to do in order to grow and flourish in your relationship with God. So then, in order to become the person God designed you to be when you meet yourself down the road someday (as we talked about last Sunday), these are the qualities you need to develop. You need to be "rooted and built up in (Christ), strengthened [or established] in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (Colossians 2:7).

Notice these four qualities of a healthy Christian life:

1. Rooted
2. Built up
3. Established
4. Overflowing with thankfulness

ROOTED

Today I'm going to talk about just the first of them: Being rooted. Everybody knows that healthy trees and plants need to have a good root system. Not surprisingly, the tallest living tree

in the world is a redwood in California. It is known as the “Mendocino Tree.” It is about 367 feet tall (slightly longer than a football field, end zones included), with a diameter of 10.5 feet, and it is more than 1,000 years old. Given their height, you might think that redwoods have the deepest roots. But they don’t. The tree with the deepest known roots is a wild fig tree in South Africa, whose roots are reported to be around 400 feet deep. Redwoods, on the other hand, have surprisingly shallow roots. Their roots only go down about 10-12 feet, which is remarkable, given their mammoth size. What is distinctive about the redwood root system is the way their roots are intertwined with the roots of other redwood trees, sometimes extending out up to 100 feet from the trunk. They are interconnected and interdependent on one another to hold each other up, especially in the face of strong winds, storms, flooding, fires, and earthquakes, and to share the nutrients they need in order to thrive and remain strong.

There is a double application that we as God’s people can take from this. The interconnection of the redwood root system shows how important it is for us to be connected to and supporting one another. The Christian life, as I hope you know, is not meant to be lived in isolation. It is meant to be lived in community. We are designed to flourish in nourishing relationships with other Christian believers. It is a mistake to think you don’t need the support and love and encouragement and accountability provided by other Christians. By *one another*. Our roots in the Christian faith need to be intertwined with one another as we seek to live for Jesus in this world. Make sure *your* roots are intertwined with your sisters and brothers in Christ – for their sake as well as your own. God can use us to hold one another up, to keep one another from falling into sin or falling away from the faith, and to help us stand strong when we face storms that threaten to undo us.

The second application is simply about the need for good roots – which usually means deep roots – if we are to be spiritually healthy and useful to God. If your spiritual roots are not good, you are not likely to produce good spiritual fruit.

Jesus touched on the importance of roots in His parable of the sower and the soils (Mark 4:1-9; cf. Matthew 13:1-9; Luke 8:4-8). The sower – a farmer – actually scattered his seed before plowing the ground. That is not how we would do it, but it is how they often did it in Israel at the time of Jesus. Inevitably, some of the seed would end up on the hardened path that either bordered a field or ran right through it. The seed that fell along the path wouldn’t produce a crop. The birds, as Jesus says, would swoop in and snatch the seed before it ever had a chance to germinate. There was no opportunity for the seed on the hardened soil (which represents a hardened heart) to take root and grow. As long as a person’s heart is hardened to the gospel, as long as a person resists God and His Word, that person’s life will be spiritually barren. Chuck Swindoll describes such people as “hard of listening” (Swindoll’s *Living Insights on Mark*, 113). Not hard of hearing. Their ears may be in fine shape. But they are hard of listening, in the sense that *they will not listen* to God, to His messengers, or to His Word. I pray that no one here today is “hard of listening.”

The second kind of soil Jesus mentions is stony ground – rocky soil that has a thin veneer of topsoil, maybe two or three inches, overlaying a thick layer of limestone bedrock. This kind of ground is good for building, but not so good for planting, because the roots can’t get enough depth to draw moisture from the ground and provide an anchor for the plant. Seeds planted in

this soil would shoot up quickly, but they wouldn't last. The heat of the sun would scorch them, and they would not last, because, as Jesus says, "they had no root" (Mark 4:6). Jesus is talking about people who hear the gospel and respond with enthusiasm at first. Their faith appears to be genuine. But when troubles intrude or life becomes difficult, they become disillusioned and fall away from the faith. When a person is disillusioned, it is because they have been living under an illusion. An illusion is a false idea or belief. It is a mistaken impression, like the illusion that if you become a Christian, Jesus will take away all your problems and you will never have to experience suffering or hurt again. If you believe this illusion, you will quickly become disillusioned, because it just ain't so. If you don't have roots that go down deep into the gospel and faith in Jesus, you won't be able to persevere in the faith when life gets hard.

The third kind of soil is thorny ground. The thorns infesting the ground choke the grain before it can grow and produce a harvest. In many cases, thorn bushes were burned off the surface of the ground, but their roots, under the surface, remained intact. The soil appeared to be good on the surface, but trouble was just waiting to happen beneath the surface – in Jesus' parable, because of the competing loyalties, desires, and worries residing in the heart. These thorns – Jesus calls them "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for (more and more) things" (4:19) – snuff the life right out of our faith and make us unproductive in our Christian walk. Everybody needs to ask, especially those of us who live in such an affluent time and place, if we are allowing these things to choke the life, the power, and the fruit of faithfulness out of our lives.

Is the world and what it offers preventing you from serving God and His purposes the way you know He wants? Our prosperity is not the problem. Our abundance of things and opportunities is not the problem. The heart of the problem is our heart. Only Jesus can unstrangle and untangle our hearts.

The fourth kind of soil is the good soil. Rich, nourishing soil. Fertile soil. Productive soil. The kind of soil God wants your life and mine to be. The good soil is the soil of a heart that allows God's Word to take deep root in it. The good soil is always ready and eager to receive the Word of God and to obey it in faith. When we allow God's Word to have "the run of the house" in our lives (Colossians 3:16, MSG), it will produce first a harvest of character in us [meaning, the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)] and then a harvest of good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10) (R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, 106-107).

Let your roots go deep into the Word of God. Let your roots go down deep into the love of God. Let your roots go down deep into the grace of God. Let your roots go down deep into the transforming truth of the gospel.

Paul talks of the importance of being rooted – the importance of having a good root system. Jesus asks, in effect, what kind of soil you are: What kind of soil does your life represent? What kind of soil represents you?

Lent is a good time to look into the mirror of your soul. It is a good time both to examine the soil of your life and the roots you are growing (or not growing) and to tend to the soil of your

heart. It is a good time to begin, or begin again, or renew your resolve to keep on growing roots in Christ that are deep and strong, so that your life may produce a harvest for God's kingdom that exceeds your wildest dreams.

Take these words from Psalm 1 to heart:

Blessed are those who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.
But their delight is in the law – the Word – of the Lord,
and on His law – His Word – they meditate day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in season and whose leaves do not wither.
(Psalm 1:1-3)

May it be so in your life and mine, in Lent and beyond to the glory and praise of His name.
Amen.