"Days of the Week" -- Sermon Series for Lent & Easter

"Day 1 -- Light and Word"
Genesis 1:1-5 & Matthew 21:1-11

Ash Wednesday -- February 25, 2004
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls

Texts
Psalm 112
Genesis 1:1-5
I John 1:1-10
Matthew 21:1-11

Suggested Hymns (TLH)
Lord Jesus, Think on Me (320)
Jesus, I Will Ponder Now (140)
O Thou That Hear'st the Sinner's Cry (325)

I. God Out There Somewhere

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

Now, that's God at a level that most people can deal with, this God who begins creating on Day One. Most people are willing to acknowledge the existence of some vague Supreme Being out there, whom most will label "God" or give a more personalized name. A few cling to atheism, insisting there is no God; but it's very hard to be an atheist as a created being. Even those who support the Big Bang theory must still acknowledge that the original material had to have an origin, a Prime Mover. Most people are willing to deal with God as Creator, no matter what else their beliefs might be.

You see, sinful man likes to have God who is the "Supreme Being" and "Creator," but nothing more specific. If all we know about God is that He made everything and He's out there somewhere, that gives our sinful nature an awful lot of leeway.

For instance, if all we know about God is that He's out there somewhere, then we can't know the specifics of what He says about us. Therefore, we have to make up the rules and guess what He would have us do, because we really can't know for sure. No, if we only have a vague knowledge of God, but nothing more specific than that, we can pretty much say we'll do our best, and who is He to hold us accountable? Maybe He believes that man is basically good. Maybe He has no problem with immorality. Maybe He's just happy if we try our best and think we're good people. If God doesn't get specific in who He is and what He commands, how can we know any better?

There's another advantage if God remains the Supreme Being out there, and nothing better. The argument goes like this: God is the Creator of all, and therefore should be worshiped by all. Therefore-and here is the sinful flaw, whatever people believe and however they worship is worship

of the same God. Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or the latest designer religion: All are trying to reach "God," whoever He may be, and so all those religions are good.

This argument will hold up as long as God is no more specific than the hazy Higher Power who created everything, and says nothing more after that. That way, man can say, "God got things going, but He's left us in charge to determine what to do from now on." And there's nothing the sinful nature likes more than thinking it's in charge.

Such an attitude betrays how quickly the Old Adam twists the good gifts of God. There is no doubt that God creates the heavens and the earth for our benefit; He certainly doesn't need them for His wellbeing. But sinful man throws up the barrier and says, "We like to have God as our Creator, as long as He doesn't tell us anything more."

You see, if God gets personal and specific, then things are going to get uncomfortable for sinful man. He's going to start to turn people off. For instance, He gets more specific at Mt. Sinai, where He gives Moses the Ten Commandments: Man now has some precise rules from God. For the most part, though, these are acceptable on man's terms. Most people agree that murder and adultery and stealing are wrong; some will object, creating loopholes for abortion and immorality out of sinful desire. However, most people are still comfortable if God this specific: "God made us and gave us rules to follow, and we should keep them because it's the right thing to do. We know what we need to know, and we don't need to know anything more." Again, people seem quite happy to keep God this vague: Be good, keep the rules, and God will love you. He's powerful, He's transcendent, and you want to please Him. They don't want anything more than that; because every time God gets more specific, He irritates the sinful nature that much more. The vaguer, the better.

Therefore, few things will anger your Old Adam more than God on a donkey.

II. God on a Donkey

Jesus said to His disciples, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." The Lord Jesus needs a donkey to ride into Jerusalem.

Ponder who sits on the donkey that day. John calls Him the Word who was in the Beginning, through Whom all things were made (John 1:1-3). Jesus calls Himself the Light of the World, who saves from darkness and delivers to life (John 8:12). The Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, is the Word and He is the Light. Therefore, consider Day 1 of Creation: God speaks and says, "Let there be light." God speaks His Word, and Jesus the Word creates light. Note the power: Light is created on Day 1. Sun, moon and stars show up on Day 4. Before the sun, there was light. Before there was light, there was the Son of God, the Light of the world.

On the back of that donkey, riding into Jerusalem, is the One through whom all things were created. Not just Creator, but Savior: As He rides into Jerusalem on Day 1 of Holy Week, the crowd cries out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!' Hosanna in the highest!" (Matt. 21:9). "Hosanna!"-"Save now!" Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee is also the eternal Son of God and Creator, and is also the Savior of that groaning creation (Ro. 8:22).

But on Day 6, that crowd is replaced by the mob shouting out, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" How could that be?

Now, remember: Man is quite happy to acknowledge that God is the Supreme Being who made everything. But when the Creator of all things rides into Jerusalem to save, it's just a few days until man puts Him to death. Why? Because God's gotten so specific. He's become flesh in order to save sinners. He's warned them of sin, and specifically told them of those sins which condemn them to death. Furthermore, He's warned them that they can't save themselves, that they're not righteous on their own-and this is a bitter blow to Old Adam's self-esteem. But why? Why has He gotten so specific? Because by exactly diagnosing the sickness, He can proclaim to them the cure. The Light has come to save from darkness. The Word has become flesh to proclaim His salvation. Instead of being vague, God has become personal to save; and so Jesus tells all to trust in Him so that they can be forgiven and have eternal life.

But this is too personal for rebellious sinners-there's no weasel room or guesswork left when the Lord specifically declares His Law and Gospel to them. So they arrange His betrayal, make false accusations, and blackmail Pilate to put Him to death on a cross.

At Calvary, created man uses created wood and nails to put his Creator to death. It is little wonder that the sun yields to darkness as the Light of the world is snuffed out; it is a far greater wonder that creation keeps on going when its Creator breathes His last and yields up His spirit.

Sinful man hates it when God gets too close and clear, and Jesus in the flesh is far too up close and personal. Kill Him.

Now, it's easy to look aghast at the mob on Calvary, astonished at their hatred and rejection of Jesus. But before casting any stones, it is always good that we examine ourselves. As long as your sinful flesh still clings to you, there will be parts of you where you would greatly prefer the Lord to keep His distance. It may be your choice of reading or internet viewing. It may be your business practices and the practicality of stepping on others to get ahead. It may be the grudge that you bear or the desire not to forgive someone else. It may be that pride which just doesn't want to feel too bad or sinful. It may be that propensity to gossip, prejudice or bigotry. It may be something that you know is wrong, but you just don't want to face. In any event, as long as Old Adam lives and breathes, there will be parts of you where you wish the Light of the World wouldn't shine quite so brightly, or where the Word made flesh would just hush up a little. It's too embarrassing and shaming when He gets too close to those.

Pay attention to these, because that's what the devil will use. He will do his diabolical best to make the sin look as attractive and needed as possible; he will do his best to make it seem far more necessary than the Lord and His grace. And in doing so, he will do all he can to make you want to keep the Lord at an arm's length so the Light doesn't shine and the Word doesn't speak…maybe a little bit further away than that. In other words, the devil wants you to think that it's bad news for you when the Lord gets specific and personal.

You must always remember that the devil is a liar.

Why does the Lord become specific and personal? Why does He become flesh and ride a donkey into Jerusalem? He doesn't do these things in order to judge or condemn you; if you check out the

Old Testament, you will find that He's quite capable of striking down sinners from far away. So why does He become flesh, so specific and so personal? To do what the crowds cry out for on Day 1, Palm Sunday: To save. He becomes flesh because, specifically, you need a perfect Sacrifice of your own flesh and blood to die for sin. You need that risen Savior to say personally to you, "I forgive you."

God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (John 3:17). The Word made flesh, the Light of the world, becomes man and lives with sinners so that He might die for them, in their place. When He rides into Jerusalem to hosanna, to save now, He is riding into Jerusalem to die. God's plan for salvation requires that His Son become man and be crucified-that's why Jesus gets close to man, draws near.

And this is why the Lord draws near to you-to save. He is well aware of your sins, no less of those that you would prefer to hide from Him. The devil would have you stiff-arm the Savior because the devil doesn't want you to be forgiven. But the Lord draws near to forgive. He doesn't welcome you in Holy Baptism to condemn, but to say, "By this water and Word, I cleanse you of all unrighteousness so that you and I might be together both now and forever." He speaks His Word to you for the same reason. His Law may bring shame over sins that you have done, but He doesn't point them out to condemn you; rather, He points them out to warn you to flee from them. And then He proclaims to you His Gospel, so that you might know that He has come near to you to give you salvation. And, of course, the Lord draws near to you in His holy Supper, giving His repentant people His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

Dear hearers in Christ, ponder the monumental truth that we find here. The Word who created all things, and the Light of the world who created light, draws near to you-not for your condemnation, but for your salvation. He shines His light upon you-not to trap you like a prisoner caught in the spotlight, but to deliver you from darkness. He speaks His Word to you, not to declare you beyond hope, but to pronounce you "not guilty" because He has already suffered your sentence. He comes near for your salvation, to save you now, with these simple, most liberating words: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen