

Our Journey Through Lent Begins 2022
Romans 10:9-15

Romans 10:9-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

Living in Washington State, Kathy and I both
enjoyed hiking trails in *old growth forests*,
surrounded by trees 150-200 years or more, untouched by loggers,
where you will see trees of similar size all lined up in a long row.

When a huge tree in the forest falls or is blown over by the wind,
as that tree gradually decays and decomposes,
seeds that land on the fallen tree may in time germinate,
and their roots receive nourishment from that **“nurse log”**.

A “nurse log” provides nutrients for the next generation of trees,
until it eventually rots away and disappears entirely,
which leaves behind a perfectly straight line of trees,
that clearly marks where that fallen tree once was.

That long line of trees in the forest is the legacy of that tree,
with its influence and nurture still visible,
having made a significant and lasting difference.

In a similar way, our faith and character, the person we’ve become,
these are all a reflection of the various influences in our life,
especially those people who took a special interest in us.

**So who were the “nurse logs” to you and to your faith development?
Who did God send to help you learn to dream, hope and aspire
to reach for the best that God intends for you to become?...**

...for that is the way that faith, a living & personal knowledge of God,
gets passed down through the ages and the generations,
and is interwoven into the very fabric of our lives.

Certainly one of the huge advantages of regular church attendance
and being an active participant in the life of a congregation,
is to place ourselves within a Christian environment
that will help and encourage us to grow in our faith,
where more knowledgeable and experienced faithful Christians
can teach us how to respond to grace and live out our faith well.

So, what happened --- that Jesus our Lord did come into your life?

I don’t mean how does someone come to faith in general,

but you in particular, what are the specific details
of your journey toward Christ, your faith-story ...
... and what was the process and the influences that were
the most instrumental in helping you respond to God's grace?

During seminary, one of my class assignments was to write out
an autobiographical story of my journey and experiences of faith.

It was a surprisingly helpful and very informative exercise,
to reflect on the various influences, the people and events
that helped shape and form my relationship with God,
along with the many twists and turns along the way.

I gained a new appreciation for the ways that others had cared for me,
and by looking back over my life and the pathways of my faith,
I saw patterns of how God had been working all along
in wonderful ways that I hadn't ever noticed before.

If you've never done so, perhaps as a spiritual exercise during Lent,
I strongly encourage you to make the effort and take the time
to reflect and write out the story of your journey of faith.

Try to remember & reflect on the people, events & circumstances,
to recall the specifics that most helped you become a Christian
and all that led you toward a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

**You may be surprised by how God's grace, purpose and wisdom
have been at work in your life in subtle yet significant ways.**

The Apostle Paul, writing about coming to a saving faith in Christ
explains in Romans how our Christian faith happens, vs. 9-10, 13

"if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from
the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the
mouth and so is saved. ... For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

In the Greek, the word, "confess" is more than just something said.
It means to be in full agreement, literally, "the same word".

So to say "Jesus is Lord" is a positive declaration that
God's Word is the truth by which I choose to live.

When Paul wrote this, every Roman, every citizen and slave
was expected to recite the phrase, "Caesar is Lord",
indicating loyalty and submission to the rule of Rome.

So it was actually an act of rebellion to proclaim, "Jesus is Lord",
because that was to declare that Caesar and Rome were not.

**And so it comes down to us, that if indeed Jesus is our Lord,
than other things, the ways and desires of this world, are not.**

If Jesus is Lord,
then my success in this world and the stuff I accumulate are not.

If Jesus really is my Lord, then my life, my time and effort
are about far more than just doing whatever I want or desire,
and my obedience, trust and loyalty in life to Jesus Christ,
is what matters most, **and that supplants everything else.**

"believe in your heart"
is another phrase that means far more than first appears.

In the Greek, “to believe” is to trust without any reservation,
and it means much more than just intellect and reason,
or recognizing and accepting certain facts as truth.

In the ancient world, the heart, was defined as that which controls
all our emotions, intellect, will, desires and reasoning,

so what I believe in my heart guides and defines everything else.

To believe in our heart refers to the core truth or value
that most decides and determines how we live in the world.

Therefore, if my faith, the faith that I claim to believe and trust,
has no real influence and no impact on the decisions I make,
then how can that faith possibly be authentic or effective?

In addition, the Greek verb tense that Paul uses in these verses
indicates that the words “to confess, to believe, and to be saved”
are all ongoing actions, things that are still in process,
that started sometime in the past, **but are still progressing...**

... inferring **that we are confessing and believing more and more,**
which means we’re still being saved & transformed more and more,
by the power of the Holy Spirit & God’s grace at work within us.

That also means, the way that we function and operate in the world
is an accurate reflection of what we truly believe in our hearts,
as we gradually grow more faithful and more Christ-like
as we’re increasingly living into God’s grace and Spirit...

...as we’re either coming closer to Christ or drifting further away,
for our thoughts, words & deeds reveal the content of our hearts.

And yet, as Christians,
we also know that despite our best efforts, willpower & intentions,
at times we still stumble and fall, we fail to be faithful.

But in a wonderful act of healing, grace and mercy toward wholeness,
God’s accomplishing what we’re unable to accomplish for ourselves.

So it’s all and entirely grace, that God promised and is doing for us,
cleansing and restoring the relationship destroyed by human sin...
... and with the coming of Jesus Christ, his sacrifice for us,
God’s promise & healing-purpose wonderfully fulfilled...

... which is the Good News and truth that we are called to proclaim,
that all are invited by grace to live in relationship with God.

It is God’s grace that starts us out on that **journey toward faith,**
and it is God’s grace that guides us **every step along the way,**
and eventually, it is God’s grace that **will lead us home.**

Ordinarily, God brings special people into our life
whose example draws us toward faith in Jesus Christ.

Recently, I was going through some boxes stored in my office,
and came across some old address books from younger days.

Thumbing through them, seeing names and memories of my distant past,
I was stuck by the many unexpected and remarkable ways

so many of them had contributed along my spiritual journey,
a blessing toward the growth and development of my faith.

So how did I become a Christian? it was because
somebody helped and guided, somebody's life told me about Jesus,
and others have shown God's grace, truth & mercy along the way,
many people who influenced me because Jesus is their Lord.

**I am so very grateful for all the faithful mentors of my life,
whose own faith journey with God was visible and authentic,
and who affirmed and challenged me to examine my own walk,
and to long for something more real, better and deeper.**

So as we come to the Lord's banquet Table of grace and hope today,
let us consider when and how we have been nurtured toward faith,
and thank God for all of those who helped us along that journey.

And as there have been those in our past who were faithful before us,
who reliably modeled Christian faith, guided and influenced us,
so now that leaves it to us - a debt we are called to repay.

Our task is to demonstrate the truth and depth of our faith in Christ
by word and deed, by our ethics and by the choices we make in life,
for by our lives we demonstrate what words of faith really mean.

Have you ever walked through Sam's Club or a grocery store
when there were folks handing little samples of food to try?,
given freely usually on toothpicks or little paper cups,
just enough to whet your appetite and to stir up
a little hunger and desire so that you want more.

As our call and task during Lent, starting today, starting now,
let us joyfully hand out little samples of God's grace and love
to all the people we encounter, as those sent to us by the Lord...

... that maybe we can whet their spiritual appetites for more,
by demonstrating God's grace, compassion and truth in ways
that will help strengthen, guide and encourage them
on their journey of faith toward walking with Jesus.

The question to ask ourselves at the Table today,
just as others have helped, encouraged and strengthened us,
**where, and who and how is the Lord calling me
to reflect and proclaim God's gracious love?**