Lenten Sermon: Three Looks for Lent
The Rev. Dr. Donald K. McKim '74

1 Peter 1:3-9

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7 so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

"Three Looks for Lent"

Lent is a special time in the church year, a time for somber reflection and penitence. Each of us has to come to grips in our own lives with how we observe Lent. In the past, folks have talked of "giving up" something for Lent. What they gave up was supposed to be significant in their lives. But sometimes people would say: "Well, I'm giving up candy or ice cream—or Netflix—for Lent." Not much stretching there; not much sacrifice! On the other hand, some folks talk of not "giving up" something for Lent, but "taking on" something for Lent. Maybe it's a new project, a new form of ministry—the resolve to read a theological book or spend time with some people in need. They take on something to add strength to their souls during these forty days before Easter. So we will all carve our own courses for Lent. We each will decide how to observe this season and what God is calling us to "give up" or "take on" during these days.

The Lenten season also gives us an opportunity to reflect on our faith as well. This is a prescription for all seasons, of course. But as we move toward the festival of Easter, as we strain forward toward the glorious day on which we celebrate in a special way, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ—that central thrust of our faith—now, in these days, if we do nothing else, we should examine our faith and grow to new understandings. What elements of our faith are lacking? What dimensions do we need to reappropriate or rediscover? In what ways can we grow in our knowledge of God's love for us in Jesus Christ? These are basic questions. Especially in Lent, these concerns should never be far from our minds. Ours is a faith in search of further understanding—all the time! We seek to grow in our faith as we learn again and again what is at the center of our Christian faith and how our Christian experience can take shape right here, right now, where we are—in the church. Lent is an important time for reflection.

In our Scripture reading from 1 Peter, we find a description of our new life in Jesus Christ and what it can mean for us. Our new life in Christ is our life of faith in Christ as our Lord and Savior—what brings us into the church and by which our Christian life grows and blesses us. So I'd like simply to focus on "Three Looks for Lent"—three dimensions of our Christian lives that point us toward the newness of life that can be ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

First, our Christian lives are **an outward-looking life**. We are people of faith who care about this world and are concerned with the problems of this world—why?—because we believe that "God so loved the world." (John 3:16) The writer of 1 Peter says, "In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have

had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1:6-7). We are people of faith who live in the midst of the world around us. In the world God loves, we do "suffer various trials." We face real life with all the situations it brings us. These situations can try our faith—bring us worry, distress, and suffering. We do not deny the realities of what this world can bring. But the word of our outward-looking faith is that even when our faith is tested, God is with us. God is with us in Jesus Christ, and our outward-looking faith can lead us to even deeper praise and glory. We are not blind idealists about living by faith in this world, believing our faith exempts us from all difficulties. Instead, our faith may bring us more difficulties! It calls us to stand, even in the midst of trials and sufferings—to face these with the attitude and belief that there is a power to sustain us. Peter says we can "rejoice"—even in our sufferings. Our faith is tested, but like valuable gold, the fires can refine and our lives can emerge resounding to the praise and glory and honor of God in Jesus Christ.

Our outward-looking Christian lives acknowledge that our trouble are real. They are real, but not final. There's a musical of the biblical story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the book of Daniel. You remember that because of their faith, they ended up in the fiery furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar. The musical is called *It's Cool in the Furnace*. Now it can only be "cool" in the "furnaces" of our lives when we look to the one who is the source of our faith, and the one who has undergone the worst fiery torments on our behalf—our Lord Jesus Christ! As we look outwardly to him, we will gain the strength and support we need to endure. And our faith will emerge, even "more precious than gold." We look outward and recognize our trials—yet we still "rejoice."

Second, our Christian life is **an onward-looking life**. We look onward. Peter says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3). We have a "living hope" by virtue of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is a hope that is alive and pulls us on, into the future. That's where our hope is centered, isn't it? Hope looks toward the coming days, toward the future. And this hope we have is an active, vital, living hope—because it is grounded in the source of all hope: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Our troubles are not final, our trials are not definitive. There is always "the next step" to take, the next move to make, the next opportunity for us to express our faith in ways that are significant and meaningful in this world.

Our Christian faith is an onward-looking faith since it is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ who gives us a "living hope" for everyday living. Our future is secured in him. And if our future is secured, we can live in the joy and freedom of the present as we serve Jesus Christ. We can involve ourselves in this world, take the risks to love others, and face all our tomorrows—not by wringing our hands in despair, but by living full of the confidence which comes from the living hope we have each day through Jesus Christ our Lord. Our Christian life is an onward-looking life.

Third, our Christian life is **an upward looking life**. We are able to rejoice in the newness of life that is ours in Christ Jesus right now. And we rejoice, says the Scripture with "an indescribable and glorious joy." (1:8) We look forward and onward. But we also look "upward." For as our Scripture says: "you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1:9) We know that all the strength we have to endure the trials, all the hope we have to face the future, comes to us from the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ and who has given to us what we could never have gained or achieved for ourselves: salvation. We look to the God who loves us in Jesus Christ and we are able to live in the present and hope for the future because we are sustained by God's power. As 1 Peter says, we are "being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last

time." (1:5) We look to God who is the source and power of our lives. We look "upward" to the "rock of our salvation," (Psalm 95:1) the One who gives us an "inexpressible gift," so that as Peter says we are "receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1:9)

We need a sense of the presence of God in our lives—not just in Lent, but in every day. We need to live each moment with the realization that we live it unto God—that God is a God who is there; that God is a God who is here. God is not remote. God is intensely, intimately involved with us and our lives. We are receiving as the "outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1:9). We look "upward" and practice the presence of God. When we do, at least two things will happen for us.

One is that when we are aware of God's presence with us: **ordinary things will become thrilling and important**. A lively sense of the presence of God can transform our daily lives into exciting adventures, because we will never know what new person we will encounter, what new ministry we might be given, or what new vision might come upon us. And even the routines of life can take on a new importance if we see them as activities that have an eternal significance. We are part of God's kingdom and are carrying out God's will—if only we will recognize it.

Then two, when we are aware of God's presence with us: **the hardest things become easier**. Hard things become easier simply because there is nothing that has to be faced alone. God is with us. And an awareness of the presence of God can strengthen and fortify us when we face tasks that, in and of themselves, seem too much to handle … even impossible! Facing any problem with a sense of God's presence can lighten the load, can cut it a bit down to size, and cause us to remember that regardless of the outcome, we are still the children of God, and we are still loved by Jesus Christ, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. How does the old saying put it: "God and one is always a majority." We can face the difficulties, because we never walk alone.

Let's let these three "looks at Lent" permeate our lives during these forty days. Let us remember that our Christian lives look outward, look onward, and look upward. And let us face these days—and all our days—with the hope and confidence of the children of God. And let us "rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy"!