"A Sermon with a Fairy Tale Ending"
Ephesians 2:4-10
March 26, 2006
4 Lent B
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
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The Word of the Lord from Ephesians 2: But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)….

Life is no fairy tale: that’s for sure. If you want a fairy tale, take Snow White. She’s a king’s daughter, which makes her a princess; but her evil step-mother tries to have her killed, so she’s left away in the wilderness for her safety. There, she lives with those seven dwarves, not even knowing she’s royalty. She has no idea that the kingdom belongs to her, so she putters around the dwarf house and kills time. Goaded by a talking mirror, the evil stepmother tries repeatedly to kill her, and finally succeeds with a poison apple. It looks like it’s curtains for Snow White, but then she’s rescued from death by a king’s son, a handsome prince who brings her back to life. You know what comes next: they live happily ever after.

That’s how fairy tales go, and your life is no fairy tale.

No, actually, you’re in much better shape than Snow White, and our epistle tells you why.

I. A Better Deal than Snow White

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, behold what is yours even now!

First off: God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. Our text begins with this glad message—you are a child of the King of kings. Because of His great love for you, God has made you His beloved child. Though you were once dead in your trespasses and cut off from God, He has made you alive together with Christ. As surely as a poison apple is a means of death, Holy Baptism is a means of grace and life: there, by water and the Word, God said, “You belong to Me for the sake of Jesus.” Your Lord is not an angry God far away, but a loving Father who desires to hear your prayers.

Now, if you’re a child of the King of kings, that makes you part of the royal family. If you’re part of the royal family, that means that the kingdom of God belongs to you. Listen carefully to the next two verses: [God] raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Did you hear? Not, God will raise us up, but God has raised us up. Not, God will make us sit in the heavenly places, but made us sit in the heavenly places. Do you see? Heaven is not yours someday if you only make it that far. You’re already God’s child for Jesus’ sake; and in Christ Jesus, the kingdom is already yours. The victory over sin is yours now. The victory over death is
yours now. Eternal life? Yours now. These gifts of God are not a future possibility: for you, in Christ, they are a present reality.

So why don’t you feel particularly victorious or eternally lively? Because right now, you’re in the wilderness, not the Promised Land. You’re still traveling through this sinful world rather than seated in the kingdom of heaven. When you leave home on a trip, you can’t see your home or enjoy its comforts—but it still belongs to you. When a prince journeys to a distant land, the kingdom back home still belongs to him. So it is with you: in Christ, God has already given you His kingdom. You already have victory over sin. You already have victory over death. You just don’t see it yet. But you will: in the ages to come, God will show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Of course, nothing is free. There is always a price to be paid, and the price is great to redeem you from sin and death. But while the price is great, it is not yours to pay: that has already been done by your Savior, Jesus. He’s gone to the cross for your sins—He’s suffered God’s judgment for you and died your death; and because God has made Him alive again, God makes you alive again. How much of the cost is passed on to you? None. Our text again: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

You have been saved by grace: you’ve been saved because the Lord has done all the work, and now He gives it to you. It’s not your works—it’s His work of life, death and resurrection that has earned this for you. You’re His child all by His doing, not your own. Consider: when you were born, it was your mother who was in labor—not you. It was she who did the work. To be born into God’s family, it is now Jesus who has done all the work for you to have life.

Now, some will insist that it’s not quite free. “You still have to believe!” they will say. “You still have to choose that forgiveness! You still have to have faith! That’s your part.” But they are mistaken. St. Paul writes, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves.” The faith that you have is not of you—it’s not your doing, not the price you pay. If you had to come up with the faith to believe, then you would have to do a work for your salvation. But your faith is not of you: rather, your faith is also a gift of God so that you might believe. God gives you food as a gift; and so that you might receive it, He has also given you a mouth. Likewise, God gives you forgiveness as a gift; and so that you might receive it, He also gives you faith. Food and mouth, grace and faith are all His gifts to you.

So far, behold the Good News that is yours for Jesus’ sake. You’re a child of God—you’re heavenly royalty. Even now, the kingdom is yours. Even now, victory over sin and death is yours. And it’s all by God’s doing—the price has been paid by Jesus, and so God gives all of this to you freely out of mercy and love.

Along with this blessing comes hope: by His Word, God already tells you all of this. You don’t wander through life oblivious of who you are, and you don’t go about your days ignorant of forgiveness and salvation. If you did, you would have no hope. If you did, you would simply put your trust only in this world and be lost. But having paid a great price for your redemption, God will not let that happen. By His Word, He keeps reminding you that you’re forgiven: in other words, He won’t let you forget that you’re royalty. He keeps announcing that victory over sin and death is yours, that yours is the kingdom of heaven for Jesus’ sake. He keeps giving you the forgiveness that Jesus won for you, and with forgiveness the victory. That’s what Holy Absolution is all about. He
summons you to His Supper, feeding you His Son’s body and blood for forgiveness; so much does He delight to welcome you to the marriage feast of heaven that He gives you a foretaste of the feast to come, even now.

One more bit of good news from this short text: For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. You are God’s workmanship—God has created you in Christ Jesus to do good works, to do His will. For you, life in this world is not a matter of sitting out your time, waiting for your number to be called. You’re a child of God, and the Lord gives you the privilege doing His work. He uses you as His instrument to accomplish His will in this world. It doesn’t matter if your station is student, employee or retiree. Whoever you are, you’re God’s child; and the Lord still has plans for you.

So there’s a look at the Good News of our text. For Jesus’ sake, you’re God’s beloved child. For Jesus’ sake, the kingdom of heaven—and victory over sin and death—are yours even now. For Jesus’ sake, God gives you this grace and faith freely. And while you wait to see the kingdom, for Jesus’ sake you are God’s instrument for as long as you live in this world. It’s all yours, and it’s all for Jesus’ sake.

II. Don’t Forget Who You Are

Given all that, sinning is pretty foolish. And repentance is a blessing to rejoice in.

There’s always that old, recurring temptation to believe that God loves you because you earn it. It might be the world, false brides or your own sinful flesh. But you’ll find yourself thinking that God loves you more when you’ve had a good day, and that He loves you less when you sin. You’ll find yourself thinking, “If I can only stay clean today, then He’ll hear my prayers.” At such times, rejoice to repent! The Lord says to you, “I love you so much that I gave My Son while you were still dead in your trespasses, so obviously I don’t love you because of how well you serve Me. I love you because, for Jesus’ sake, you’re My child. When you do good works, I rejoice. When you sin, I desire to forgive you.” Beware of this temptation to believe that you earn God’s help by your works and acts of faith. The Lord declares, “If you believe in a god who rewards you for your works, then you are looking for a different god. Rejoice to repent, because I forgive you all for Jesus’ sake.”

Every day, you’ll be tempted to sin. You’ll want to feed your impatience, ignore those in need or satisfy your carnal desires. When you do, rejoice to repent! The Lord declares, “Such sins are not the works of My children. They are not to be done in My household. If you choose to remain in the sinful things of this world, I will not force you to be saved. But this shantytown of a dying world will perish in a fervent heat, and you will die with it if you do not repent. How foolish, when the kingdom is yours. Don’t forget who you are: for Jesus’ sake, you’re already My beloved child! For Jesus’ sake, heaven is already yours! Don’t cling to sins that will kill you, but repent and rejoice in My mercy.”

At times, you’ll be frustrated because you feel useless, drifting or without purpose. It might be that graduation’s getting closer and you have no idea what to do with your life. It might be that you’re pushing 50 and you’re finding out that “mid-life crisis” isn’t such a punch-line after all. It might be that you’re retired, and you’re buying the world’s notion that you’ve outlived your usefulness to society. Should you feel such frustration or depression, rejoice to repent! While the future may not be clear to you, the Lord declares, “Don’t forget who you are! Uselessness is not for you. For Jesus’
sake, you are My workmanship. I have created you in Christ to do good works; and while you may not be comfortable or feel successful where you are, I am still using you as My chosen instrument until the day I call you home.”

At times, you’ll be afraid. Confronted with worry or trouble or the threat of death, you’ll grow anxious as you doubt God’s faithfulness and mercy. Again, rejoice to repent! The Lord declares, “Don’t forget who you are! For Jesus’ sake, I’ve already given you victory over sin and death! For Jesus’ sake, you already have eternal life. The kingdom is yours forever!”

Of course, you’re still going to sin. Thanks to your weakness and Old Adam’s work, you’re still going to ignore the victory God has given you and give into temptation each day. As Martin Luther said, you haven’t gotten used to acting like a prince or princess in His palace yet. So, you’ll sin. Having sinned, you’ll feel guilty. And feeling guilty, you’ll be tempted to believe that you’re not part of God’s family anymore. In other words, you’ll doubt God’s promise of forgiveness. If so, repent and rejoice! The Lord says, “Don’t forget who you are. You’re already My beloved child. You’re already forgiven because My Son has taken all your sins away. And for Jesus’ sake, though your sins be as scarlet, before Me they are white as snow.

White as snow. That’s you. I said before that you have it better than Snow White, and from today’s text you know why. Like the fairy tale princess, you’re a child of the King—brought into His family for Jesus’ sake. Like the fairy tale princess, the entire kingdom is already yours, even though you don’t see it yet. Like the fairy tale princess, you’re saved by the King’s Son who has sought you out. But here are important differences. While that poor girl lived in oblivion of her true identity in the wilderness, the Lord constantly reminds you who you are, lest you forget and despair. He tells you that you are His instrument for the duration of your life. But more important than that, Snow White is just a fairy tale—though one wonders if it was first written as an allegory of the Church. Snow White is just a fairy tale, but God’s love for you in Christ is real. Christ has truly died and risen for you. He truly washes your sins away and gives you His true body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. For Jesus’ sake, you’re truly His beloved child. For Jesus’ sake, the kingdom of heaven—and victory over sin and death—are yours even now. For Jesus’ sake, then, you will truly live happily ever after: because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen