

**LENT 4**  
**10/3/24**  
**CAVES BEACH**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

God is good; God's steadfast love lasts forever.

**We know it, we believe it, we proclaim it!**

God is good; God's steadfast love lasts forever.

**Those who thirst for new life are satisfied; those who hunger for the living Word are filled!**

God is good; God's steadfast love lasts forever.

**The imprisoned ones know freedom; sinners know pardon!**

God is good; God's steadfast love lasts forever.

**The powerful are humbled; the needy are raised up from their distress!**

God *is* good!

**God's steadfast love lasts forever!**

**Opening Prayer**

You are with us as we go with Jesus towards Jerusalem, most gracious God, and we are thankful.

**You stay with us in the tough moments of reflection and confession.**

You are with us, reminding us of all that sustains us as a faith community,  
**our common life of faith, our encouragement of one another.**

You are with us as we make clear your realm of love and justice beyond this church.

**You are our inspiration for mission; you are at the heart of our service to others.**

You are with us as we walk beside the cross-carrying Jesus.

**You remind us of the demanding call to discipleship, of our need to confront the dark, self-serving powers.**

Most gracious God,

**stay with us! Amen.**

**HYMN 154** Great is your faithfulness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4ox4es1jo8>

**PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION**

O mighty God, we cheer on your rock-solid love.  
We give thanks for your reliable presence in our times of peril.  
We keep making our way to Death Valley,  
but you rescue us from ourselves.  
You take our sin-sick lives and speak words of life;  
you transform the soils of our lives  
so that new life can spring forth – good fruit! Healthy vineyards!  
It's you, beautiful God, that is turning our lives upside-down.  
It's you, loving God, guiding us all into celebration and togetherness.  
Mighty God, we cheer on your rock-solid love.

**As we** sing of the “ Love that wilt not let us go” we remember with shame the times when we have not reflected that depth of love in and through our lives. God of steadfast love, forgive us any unloving and unlovely actions and words.

God of unchanging love, as this community of faith, we confess the times when our love for the world falls short of your love for us.

God of unlimited love, forgive us for too often replacing love with judgment. Merciful and loving God, help us to empty ourselves of all that hinders your life-giving love to shine through our lives.

Strengthen us with your Spirit to be credible witnesses of your love as we experience it in and through Jesus, your Son, our Saviour and Lord. Amen

## ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

God, who is rich in mercy, out of great love for us - even when we were dead through our sins - made us alive together with Christ...for by grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God. (Based on Ephesians 2:4,5,8) And so I declare to you, in Jesus Christ we are loved and we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

## READINGS

- **Ephesians 2:1–10**

You were dead through the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. 3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, 4 but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive

together with Christ — by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

- **John 3:14–21**

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

**HYMN 164** The great love of God

No You Tube but try this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4ox4es1jo8>

## **SERMON**

This week’s readings include the classic passage from John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Associated with this is another classic passage, this time from Ephesians 2: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

This reminds me of a discussion between two pastors a few years ago. They both turned up to meet with other pastors for a group gathering. As is so often the case all of the others turned up very late. While waiting they were joking about that tardiness one said to the other that either the others were late or was it that the 'Rapture' has happened, and they were the only two of the pastors left behind? The Rapture being an apocalyptic idea that one day Gods will draw only the worthy up into heaven, the rest being left on earth.

There is a constant undercurrent in a lot of churches that the preaching does not include enough references to the end of the world and the coming judgement. What was not mentioned in this conversation between the pastors was the possibility that the final judgement might be happening moment by moment and that we are unaware of it.

Normally when we come to talk about the end times, or Judgement Day and eternal life, we speak about it as an event which will occur at some time in the future, almost as if it is some romantic story. If we look at what are called the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) they express those ideas as being in the future.

However John's Gospel, which was written many years later than those Gospels, judgement is mostly looked at quite differently. Biblical scholars refer to John's approach as 'realised eschatology' which describes the concept that judgment has already occurred and is still happening now.

While the ideas might be different they are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are looking at the same thing from differing perspectives. John's approach gives us something to do now, rather than just waiting for the future.

The passage from John comes in the context of a longer discussion Jesus is having with Nicodemus. There are a few references to judgement in this section of the Gospel. Judgement here is expressed in current terms not some future event. What does come though is God's desire to avoid people being judged. Jesus tells us that God does not want any of us to be condemned. People actually do it to themselves. Jesus suggests that people judge themselves and judgement is not God's way.

John tells us “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order to save it.” The desire to save the world comes out of God’s great love for His creation. This week’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians spells this out even more elaborately — ‘even though we were dead in our sins, God, who is rich in mercy, loved us with a great love’... Paul goes on to talk of God showing the “immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

John does not use complex language like Paul but, as I said earlier, here is one of the most profound statements in the Bible about faith: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”

In this there is a hidden reference to the pain that God suffers. Any parent, let alone any person, can imagine how this sort of event would impact them.

While making a massive sacrifice for a loved one can be understood on an individual basis it is hard to comprehend the pain of doing it for the whole of humanity. How many of us would consider how to put their child in danger, let alone sacrifice a child, for the good of the world?

We can find it hard enough to sacrifice \$50 for some starving person in Africa or the Middle East. We don’t know these people personally, let alone the fact that we have no idea of their family situation. So often they are just raw statistics on the nightly news.

It is a different story for us when it comes to our own children, especially in their formative years. We will sacrifice almost anything to protect our children. Compare this with God being prepared to sacrifice His Son for the whole world.

If you ever saw the movie Saving Private Ryan, the whole premise of the story was that if a mother had lost three of her sons, the army shouldn’t put at risk the only remaining son so they’d pull him out of battle and send him home.

But God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

So let’s reflect on the enormity of God’s love so that we can start to grasp what John’s Gospel is telling us about how God approaches judgement. If

we only think about judgement as a future event then we follow the process where God gives the gift, we respond and then one day we are judged on how well we responded.

In John's perception we are actually the ones making that judgement. John tells us that in God's immeasurable love He gives us the gift freely and how we choose to respond is the judgement. It is the way that we respond to God's gift that judges us.

The day of judgment is the day we encounter the love of God in Christ and therefore we can decide to either entrust ourselves to this God or turn our back and walk away. No other judgment is needed. Everything else is just the outworking of our decision.

Heaven and hell, and all that, are not some other reality that a great judge will one day decide to send you to. When you decide how to respond to the love of God in Jesus you are deciding which of those realities you will now live in — starting now. It is your decision and God respects you enough to honour your decision no matter how much it breaks the heart of God.

If we reflect on verses 19 to 21 of the reading from John we can see the images of light and darkness that it brings out. We are told that either we love the darkness and therefore avoid the light, or we choose to enter into Christ's light and leave the darkness behind.

The judgement might not even be something that God wants to bring into the world. However when the illumination of God's love shines onto the world people can't help but respond thus passing their own judgement. We don't have the option not to choose! Even when we choose not to make a commitment one way or another we are in fact making a profound commitment.

Let's look at it this way. When a train pulls into our local station, or a boat into the harbour, you can choose whether or not you are going to get on board. Once the train, or the boat, leaves the option to choose whether to board or not has passed. By deliberately not making a commitment you have made a judgement about where you are going.

This is simply expressed by the scholars as 'realised eschatology.' We don't have the option of avoiding making any decision and putting it off until later. This decision making is ongoing now and into the future.

For us the judgement is now.

The final chapter of the world's story is written when the world encounters the gift of God's love in the crucified Christ and either accepts or rejects the gift.

The final chapter of your story is written when you encounter the gift of God's love in the crucified Christ and either accept or reject the gift. If we accept this gift we are then nurtured by the Holy Spirit.

If we are not in the habit of holding God's unlimited love in our conscious mind this whole idea can sound a bit like a harsh and legalistic and draconian situation for us. The important thing here is to hold onto the important and life changing image of God's extraordinary self-initiated love for each of us.

How many of us can recall the emotion of desperately being in love and offering another person our full commitment then having to patiently wait for their considered response. This is not simply choosing but the agony of having to wonder if that person will respond or throw it back in our face in a careless way. Just saying that they want to keep their options for a relationship open is the same as saying no!

If you know that feeling, then you know something of the how God feels, and you know something of the broken heart of the crucified Christ, and you know that the day of judgment comes at the moment the offer is made. God is not waiting to pass judgement on you.

The anxious waiting is for you to pass judgement on God. God has absolutely no desire to condemn you, now or ever. God has sent His only Son into the world in a desperate act of self-sacrificial love to open for you a way of escape from all the world's self-destructive wrath and condemnation.

God will not force anything on you, and as you, moment by moment, pass judgement on God and on the extravagant love and mercy of God, you are

commenting yourself to living with the consequences of your own judgement.

You either create for yourself a world where love and mercy and life have been rejected — a world we call hell — or you embrace the world that God is creating and offering to you where love and mercy and life are flourishing and celebrated and open to all, no matter how undeserving we may be. The day of judgement is now, and the judge is you. For God's sake, judge in favour of love and mercy and life.

**HYMN 129** Amazing grace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zG3wOkWyYAA>

### **PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING**

God has met us and embraced us with love and grace. May love and grace guide us in our giving today.

Loving God, may your whole-making love reach into all the corners of the cosmos. Include the offering of our tithes as one small part of this. Amen.

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

#### **St Luke's Uniting Church – Belmont**

St Luke's Uniting Church Belmont is a congregation that has two morning services each Sunday and a fairly new venture of *Dinner Church* on Sunday evening. Dinner Church is all ages and is informal and meets over an evening meal. This group is also an outreach to people in the community. It has also allowed some of our families who cannot come in the morning because of sport to attend. As well as all the usual groups and activities St Luke's has two major community groups where both church members and community members attend. A Monday morning Activity Centre and a Tuesday quilting group.

**Prayer:** We pray for the community outreach activities at Belmont. For the Monday morning Activity Centre and the Quilting group on Tuesdays. We pray also for the Sunday evening Dinner Church. That people from the community will continue to attend and to feel welcome. Amen.

Today as we journey through Lent, now at the fourth Sunday, we come to God in prayer, understanding that as we contemplate our Lord on the cross, we see that we are drawn from the darkness of self-centredness, to the light of serving him and living in his name. We come then, in order to



pray for ourselves and others who are both close-by and far away, so that God's will may be done here on earth as it is heaven. Following each prayer, I will say, "God of grace", and then your response will be, "hear our prayer". Let us pray:

Creator God, we give thanks for these beautiful autumn days we are experiencing. We come with grateful hearts that we live in the peace and freedom that we enjoy each day. We know that our own reality is very far from many of our brothers and sisters across the globe. We continue to pray for the cessation of war in the Ukraine, the Middle East, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Sudan; and in all places where there is civil strife. We pray that cries of injustice may be heard and acted upon. We pray your wisdom and skill upon all those involved in negotiations, and upon those endeavouring to relieve suffering from starvation, from wounds of violence, and from mental anguish.

God of grace, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we give thanks for the opportunities we enjoy to learn of you and how wide and deep your love is. We pray that we may draw deeply into the truths of Easter, as we come closer, so that we truly appreciate your love for us even more. We pray for our community of faith here at Caves Beach, and pray today especially for our new Community Engagement Coordinator, that your Holy Spirit will guide and undertake all aspects of this role. As we pray for ourselves, we pray for other churches in our Presbytery area, and especially today for the Belmont Uniting congregation. We join with them in prayer for their outreach activities, for the Monday morning Activity Centre and their Quilting group, and also especially for their Sunday evening Dinner Church, that people from their community will continue to attend and to feel welcome.

God of grace, hear our prayer.

God of compassion, we pause to reflect on the situations of people all around us who desire to be loved and cared about. Help us to move out beyond our own little world so that we are truly willing to be alongside others: where health problems are daunting, where there is isolation and hence loneliness and lack of affection, where there is bereavement, where there is relationship breakdown, where there is disability, where care of an ageing spouse or parents who struggle with mind and memory is becoming

difficult. May we be willing to lend a hand where we are able and hold fast to Jesus, knowing that in him we find our rest and relief from strain and stress.

God of grace, hear our prayer.

Into your hands, O Lord our God, we commend ourselves and all who need our love and protection. Bless those who we know personally and come near to them each day and night we pray. (We'll take some time in silence to name them, and let us include too, those on our parish list: Val, Jack and Myra, Pat, Keith, Marie and Pam.....) We thank you O God, that your love is boundless and is never ceasing. We give thanks too, for those who have gone before us who we remember fondly in our hearts as we trust your offer of eternal life.

God of grace, hear our prayer.

All these prayers we bring to God in the wonderful name of Jesus, who taught us the prayer we now sing together:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours  
now and for ever. Amen.

**HYMN 147** To God be the glory

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-15v9iworAU>

**BENEDICTION**

For God so loves you,  
dear brothers and sisters,  
that there is a total embrace of who you are –  
and all of this without a hint of condemnation!  
So, for all of you who know the rich reservoirs of divine love and grace,  
share love and grace wherever you go.  
Love people in such a way that they feel no compulsion  
to hide or pretend to be anything other than who they truly are.  
May God bless you with reminders of your own belovedness  
and with words that speak of God's desire to be your strength  
when you yourself aren't feeling strong.  
Go in the grace and peace of Christ. Amen.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH\\_HdkWs74](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH_HdkWs74)