

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Lent 3

March 8, 2026

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

***Refreshment for the soul***

—Romans 5:1-7

Here's a little scenario, a picture I'd like to paint for all our spring break/spring training visitors who have been joining us for this delightful, Chamber of Commerce weather these past couple weeks. I want you to picture this: It is June in Arizona. The thermometer says it's 119 degrees. The sun is beating down relentlessly through a clear, blue sky. You walk across the parking lot, where it's even hotter, and you sweat, but you don't even feel the sweat because it evaporates as soon as it exits your pores. The only way you know you've been sweating is when you lick your lips and you taste the salt that's left behind from your perspiration. You literally could cook an egg on the sidewalk. Now tell me: At that moment, what does your body need more than anything to stay alive? Some will say, "Air conditioning!" but, of course, that's not the right answer. You need water. You need electrolytes to replace what's lost in your sweat. You need fluid, and if you stay out in the sun very long without it, you will die. Yes, my dear winter-visitor friends, this is literally what we deal with during the Arizona summer!

This past week we welcomed students from Martin Luther College to our campus for two beautiful concerts. We told the choir, "Use sunscreen liberally!" It's typical for college students spending spring break in Arizona to think, "But I want to get some color! I want to go back to Minnesota with a nice Arizona tan!" We reminded them, if you don't use sunscreen you will get some color—after a half hour in the sun your skin will be bright red! Fortunately, almost all of them listened to the advice, and there weren't many sunburns. We also told them, "Stay hydrated! Even if you don't feel thirsty, make sure you are drinking enough water."

Here in Arizona, we live every day in the Sonoran desert, so we often take this for granted, but it remains true: Life itself is a desert. It is a parched, barren wilderness. Sometimes we enjoy comfort and relaxation in the occasional oasis. We enjoy material blessings, family and friend blessings, vacation blessings, good health, beautiful weather—many blessings. But in this barren desert called life we also suffer. We have stress, pressure, anxiety. We suffer health problems. Surgeries. Aches and pains. We have accidents, financial setbacks, personal conflicts, strife. We lose loved ones. We might enjoy comfortable, air-conditioned homes and refreshing swimming pools, but life itself is still a desert, and in this desert called life we need refreshment for our souls,

Jesus knew that the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in our Gospel today needed spiritual refreshment. "You should have asked me, and I would have given you living water." Jesus knew that this woman, an outcast in her town, lost and wandering far from God, was parched and dry and spiritually thirsty. So what does he give her? He gives her himself! "I, who am speaking to you, am the Messiah," Jesus told her. "I'm the one who came to give you forgiveness for your sins and a right relationship with God." The woman trusted Jesus, and her thirst was quenched.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul has just spent the first four chapters of the book explaining why the only way we can have a right relationship with God is through simple faith in Jesus Christ. If we could keep God's commandments, we would be just fine with God through our own merit, but we cannot keep God's commandments. If we could be good, moral, upstanding people, we would be just fine with God through our own efforts, but we haven't done that. We have broken God's law and become wicked and immoral. We have sinned against God. We have fallen short of God's standard. We have created hostility between ourselves and our Maker. For our sins we have earned ourselves a death sentence. Nothing we can do can remove the stain of our sin, remove the burden of our own guilt, or remove the death sentence. It is what we have earned. It is all we can earn. If it is up to us, unless God provides an alternate solution to our eternal problem, there is no escape from outer darkness and eternal fire. This is the terrifying reality that each of us is facing on our own: We are going to die, and there is nothing we can do to stop it. We are going to face God in the judgment, and there is no choice we have in the matter. All we can do is take on another day, put on our game face, make the most of the short time we have before we fade like grass and are blown away. By ourselves our situation is desperate, hopeless.

Into this hopeless, desperate wilderness God himself stepped up to intervene. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, stepped into the breach and stood between us and God's righteous judgment. Jesus fought against Satan's temptations and won. Jesus lived under God's commandments and prevailed, keeping them perfectly. Jesus offered himself as the perfect, innocent, atoning sacrifice and spilled his blood that is the payment for your sin and my sin and everyone's sin, and on the cross he died—the righteous for the unrighteous. Now God says, look at your Substitute! Look at your Sacrifice! He has done it all! As Pastor Pufahl told us last week, "Look and live!" With eyes fixed on Jesus, with hearts that trust in Jesus, we hold onto Jesus in faith, and we are justified. In Jesus we are not-guilty before God! We have complete forgiveness for our sins. Paul says, *"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Simple trust in Jesus! Just holding onto Jesus and not letting go at any cost! There we have peace with God. No more hostility. No more punishment. No more wrath. *“Through him we also have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand. And we rejoice confidently on the basis of our hope for the glory of God.”* No more fear. No more desperation. Only love and kindness and mercy in God’s beloved Son, Jesus. We stand in God’s grace. We stand basking in God’s complete, all-enveloping, undeserved love for us. And because we bask in God’s grace, we rejoice confidently and know that what’s waiting for us is the glory of God. Not outer darkness and eternal fire but heaven. Perfect bliss! Unending happiness in the realms of light celebrating in the glory of God forever. I’ll read it again: *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

What we could not and cannot earn by our own works and efforts, God gives us through faith. This is a game changer! It completely changes everything about our lives and our journey through this life. Instead of shuffling along through the parched wilderness of this life, we are refreshed. Life is still a desert, but we go through this desert covered by the shade of God’s presence. *“The LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore”* (Psalm 121:6-8).

This is such a game-changer that Paul can go on and say, *“Not only this, but we also rejoice confidently in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope. And hope will not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us.”* Wait a second—rejoicing in our sufferings? That sounds twisted, masochistic even. Why would we rejoice when we’re suffering, when bad things are happening to us? Paul tells us; he reinforces the old saying, *“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”* We rejoice in our suffering because we know that God will bring us through difficult times, and he’ll use our suffering for our good. Sometimes God knocks out from under us all the props that we want to lean on. Everything that we rely on to get us through difficult times—money, power, reputation, our wits, our problem-solving abilities, our reason, our health—one by one God takes them all away, so that there’s nothing left to rely upon but him. Then through patient endurance and tested character we see clearly that our hope is only in the Lord God and greater than any of those other props in our support system is the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the only way we can truly cherish the precious gift of God’s Holy Spirit is when everything else is gone. Then we can see that God’s Spirit in our hearts is enough. That’s why we rejoice in our sufferings!

In this parched and dreary land, our soul craves refreshment. We are thirsty for God’s love. We need God’s love. We crave God’s love. But sometimes it feels like God’s love is far away. Sometimes, when we’re in the middle of some crisis, God’s love is the last thing on our minds. Instead of reveling in God’s love, we ask, *“Why, God? How, God? Where are you, God?”* Which brings up a serious question: *How do you know that God loves you? Because you feel it? That doesn’t always work out. Because everything in your life is going really well? That can change. How do you know God loves you through all the ups and downs, the joys and trials, the pleasures and the hardships, the vagaries and vicissitudes of life? It’s really simple: “God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* That’s it. It never changes. It’s rooted in an event that is cemented in history, an event that testifies for all eternity of God’s immeasurable love for you. He died for you. He poured out his lifeblood on the cross, and he laid down his life for you as the payment for your sins. Done. Finished. Complete. Sealed.

Jesus didn’t die for you because you were so worth dying for. He died for you because he is God and he loves you. He didn’t die for you because you were worth saving. He died for you because you were helpless and lost, and his death was the only way to rescue you. *“For at the appointed time, while we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly. It is rare indeed that someone will die for a righteous person. Perhaps someone might actually go so far as to die for a person who has been good to him. But God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

So drink it in! Peace with God, strength in suffering, certainty in God’s love. Forgiveness of sins, eternal rescue and redemption. All given to you as a free gift, through simple faith in Jesus. Quench your thirst! Refresh your soul! Amen.