

Sunday, March 14, 2021

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B

Prayer of the Day

O God, rich in mercy, by the humiliation of your Son you lifted up this fallen world and rescued us from the hopelessness of death. Lead us into your light, that all our deeds may reflect your love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: Numbers 21:4-9

Though God provides food and water for the Israelites in the wilderness, they whine and grumble. They forget about the salvation they experienced in the exodus. God punishes them for their sin, but when they repent God also provides a means of healing: a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole.

⁴From Mount Hor [the Israelites] set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Psalm: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

You deliver your people from their distress. (Ps. 107:19)

¹Give thanks to the LORD, for the | LORD is good,
for God's mercy en- | dures forever.

²**Let the redeemed of the | LORD proclaim
that God redeemed them from the hand | of the foe,**

³gathering them in | from the lands;
from the east and from the west, from the north and | from the south.

¹⁷**Some were fools and took re- | bellious paths;
through their sins they | were afflicted.**

¹⁸They loathed all man- | ner of food
and drew near | to death's door.

¹⁹**Then in their trouble they cried | to the LORD
and you delivered them from | their distress. R**

²⁰You sent forth your | word and healed them
and rescued them | from the grave.

²¹**Let them give thanks to you, LORD, for your | steadfast love
and your wonderful works | for all people.**

²²Let them offer sacrifices | of thanksgiving
and tell of your deeds with | shouts of joy. **R**

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

While we were dead in our sinfulness, God acted to make us alive as a gift of grace in Christ Jesus. We are saved not by what we do but by grace through faith. Thus our good works are really a reflection of God's grace at work in our lives.

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, 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. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Gospel: John 3:14-21

To explain the salvation of God to the religious leader, Nicodemus, Jesus refers to the scripture passage quoted in today's first reading. Just as those who looked upon the bronze serpent were healed, so people will be saved when they behold Christ lifted up on the cross.

[Jesus said:] ¹⁴“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that 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. ¹⁸Those 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But 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.”

Sermon

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen

It always seems good to have favorite texts of Christians of all times as part of our weekly texts. This week is no exception. Today our gospel text from John includes verse 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

This has been one of my favorite passages of scripture since I was young. This verse has been said to be the gospel in miniature. The gospel in one verse. And other pithy sayings. And certainly, it is a verse worthy of remembering. It is the core for many folks of what Christianity and living a Christian life is all about.

It is relatively easy, I believe, to simply concentrate on this well known, well loved verse as if it were a complete thought, a complete story in and of itself. But that would be a misconception.

We must always, of course, view any bit of scripture in context. This beloved verse doesn't stand alone. It is surrounded by events both before it and after it. And so it may best be understood and appreciated as we look at what John is telling us in this section of his gospel.

The preceding verse, verse 15, harkens back to our first lesson today from the Book of Numbers where we find an interesting story about God's people in the wilderness.

Here we find the Israelites angry at both God and Moses. They are not happy campers. They believe they don't have enough to eat or drink, and they don't like the food that is provided for them.

I don't know about you but when I read this, I think of cranky kids who are having a bad day with parents and the world.

So, to add insult to injury the Lord sends serpents that bite people and cause them to die from the bites.

And it is then that the Israelites recognize that they have sinned against the Lord and they pray that God will remove the serpents from their presence. Moses then intercedes for the people and prays to God.

And God responds in what seems to be a most unusual way. God tells Moses that he is to make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look up and live. It sounds as if this might be the premise of a novel by Stephen King.

We find that Moses was obedient and made a serpent of bronze and placed in on top of a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Quite a story. An unusual story of God's people in the wilderness as they travel to the Promised Land.

Now, back to our gospel text. Why in the world, do you think, John includes this story at this point in his gospel?

The answer is – to make a most important point. And not just to us today. This story from John has another person involved but not mentioned in our text today. That person is Nicodemus, the same Nicodemus who shows up later in John's gospel. This means that as a religious leader Nicodemus will appreciate the story that is our first lesson. He will understand the life-giving effort of looking up to a serpent on a pole and being saved. And John is saying that our sins are forgiven as we look up at Jesus on the cross. For Jesus died that we may have eternal life. The parallel would not be missed by Nicodemus.

Beginning with verse 17 today, John further explains to Nicodemus what verse 16 means for all people including Nicodemus. So it would be good for us to take time to study the third chapter of John with an eye to context and what John is trying to relate about our sinfulness, forgiveness and the death of Jesus on a cross. It is an interesting study that allows us insight into God's love and how it is played out in every age.

A deeper look at our first lesson and the gospel text will show us clearly how strange it is to compare Jesus on the cross to the serpent on the pole Moses held up to heal the people of their sin. And even stranger, the healing comes from looking at the serpent on the pole, as it does with the crucified Christ in our gospel text. To look at Jesus crucified and lifted up, and to believe that this is God's way of saving, is to find healing and new life.

We also need to be aware that the main vehicle of healing is truth-telling. In our first lesson, the serpent on the pole forces the Israelites to see the truth of their unfaithfulness, the real poison that is killing them, so they can, as a people, find healing.

This truth is never abstract: it is always truth that is embodied in Jesus. Later in John's gospel we hear yearly on Reformation Sunday, that Jesus is the truth, and that this truth will set us free. This is the same truth revealed on the cross, and it gives fullness of life in God, that is – eternal life. As in our first lesson, the truth is that our rejection of God on God's terms revealed in Jesus is killing us.

All of this then leads anyone and any community of believers gathered around the cross to not ask – Do we believe enough in Jesus to be saved? The questions raised are really these: What truth is being revealed today through the cross of Jesus that we must painfully admit so that we can be set free? How do we reject God on God's own terms, which are mercy and love for all? With what injustice is Christ suffering in solidarity? How is our world resisting the coming kingdom of peace and unity that Jesus makes real even today?

In many ways these questions are before us always, but our texts today make us face them once again in light of our gospel text. It may be that we, like Nicodemus, are truly hearing these words for the first time.

Within verse 16 and the immediate preceding verses as well as those that follow you and I can see that the truth of our sinful ways is necessary but not sufficient for the transformation that God brings through the good news of Christ.

In a sense you and I are able to see additional words on the cross in the shape of Jesus' body: forgiveness, grace, love, new life. And seeing all of these truths revealed together in the cross of Jesus could be the most transforming thing you and I and others see this season of Lent.

When we think about it, we realize that we are living in an age when truth claims have become suspect. Whether it is the postmodern suspicion of the power dynamics at play in truth claims, the politicization of journalism leading to claims of "fake news," or the rejection of scientific truth claims such as evolution or climate change, truth has become a problem for us.

How do we make such a bold claim today that Jesus is truth, that Jesus is the embodiment of God's truth?

The answer I believe is to take life one day at a time. We can only do what we can do today. Tomorrow may pose yet another challenge to the truth we know that is Jesus.

Yet we march ever forward, reveling in the knowledge that God is leading the way and will provide us with the words to say when we need them.

We should all take heart and not be discouraged. After all Nicodemus departs from our gospel story today and the sun rises once again. Nicodemus returns later in John's gospel. Some messages take a long while. And the sun rises once again.

Our message remains the same. Our challenge is how to tell it as times change, as attitudes change. God's truth is always God's truth.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

You sent your Son that the world might be saved through him. Inspire the witness of the church throughout the world. Empower missionaries, Bible translators, and ministries of service in your name. Bless our partners in ministry (*specific mission partners may be named*), our ELCA global partner churches, and Young Adults in Global Mission. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

From east to west your steadfast love is shown. Nourish seas and deserts, wilderness areas and cities. Give water to thirsty lands; nurture spring growth that feeds hungry creatures; bless farmers as they prepare for the growing season. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You sustained your people in the wilderness. Give courage to all who lead in times of crisis and scarce resources. Prosper the work of those who aid victims of famine and drought (*especially*). Bring peace in places where scarce resources cause violence. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Your mercy endures forever. Deliver all who cry to you, especially those who are hungry or without homes. Give life in places where death seems triumphant; give healing to those who are sick and comfort to those who mourn. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

By grace we have been saved. Fill this congregation to overflowing with that grace, that we show mercy to others. Nourish any in our midst who are hungry, especially children, and bless our ministries of feeding and shelter (*especially*). Give us patience and courage when the way seems long. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

Your Son was lifted up that whoever believes might have eternal life. We praise you for all who have died in Christ. Bring us with all the saints into the fullness of your promises. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.