

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Fourth Sunday of Lent - Year B

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

03/11/2018

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John;

[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.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

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

Lifted Up

Good morning! Today's Old Testament lesson has always had a soft spot in my heart. Which is weird for a text about snakes and people dying, but bear with me. Now, I know you're probably a little worried, two Old Testament sermons in a row! What in the world is going on? But in order to understand today's gospel lesson we need to wrestle with our Old Testament reading first.

When I was beginning to discern a call to ministry I would meet up with my pastor once a week to read over the text for that coming Sunday. Then, the two of us would talk about it. The lectionary reading we have today is the very first text that I remember seeing a pattern between the readings. It's important for me for no other reason that I got it, and I guess having a lightbulb go off reading scripture just isn't the type of thing you forget.

When you really look at the Old Testament text today you notice a few things. The first is that the Israelites are acting like they always seem to be: whining about the current state of things. It's a common theme for the story of God's people, lost and frustrated, complaining and ungrateful. In fact, it's the story of ALL of God's people, not just the Israelites. So what happens? In our sin we reap a harvest of suffering and death. Snakes, those old enemies of ours, are loose

and causing trouble again. Now here is where the story gets really interesting, as if poisonous snakes and an entire society on the run isn't interesting enough, they come to Moses and ask for some help. "We have sinned," they say. "Please fix this!" But instead of giving them a quick fix-all solution God does something different. God tells Moses to cast a bronze snake and attach it to a pole so that the Israelites can be healed ONLY after they look upon it.

Instead of God just taking care of the problem with an easy solution, instead, the Israelites get an answer that forces them to play a part too. It would be super-easy for God make the problem go away, but it seems that God doesn't work that way, which can be uncomfortable for us who are so used to the God we see in Jesus Christ. Dr. Howard, an Old Testament professor at Luther Seminary writes the following: *"As 21st-century Christians it may take us out of our comfort zones to imagine God as a dangerous, unpredictable presence in our lives. Yet, if we claim that we've got God all figured out, then we have ignored the mystery and divine freedom with which God is characterized throughout much of Scripture. A domesticated, unmoving God does not pull a people out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land; no, we need a God who is, in those oft-repeated words of Don Juel, 'on the loose!'"*¹

And that is what we get throughout all of scripture, a God who breaks with the conventional wisdom and expectation and who throws us for a loop time and time again. And so... where other stories might portray a god who heroically deals with the snakes in a powerful way, our God operates much differently, forcing the Israelites to do something that has always been strange for us human beings: our God forces us to stare our sin right in the face.

¹https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3606

Confronting our own sin is something we hate. We try to convince ourselves that it's someone else's fault, that we couldn't have made that mistake. But sin we do, all the time. I guess that's another reason that this story has always stuck out in my mind. The Israelites were forced to look at their sin, to stare at it and confront that reality before they could be healed.

And the text doesn't even mention anything about the snakes leaving. The biting doesn't apparently stop, people still get sick, it's just that they can now be healed. It seems that our mistakes, our sins, have consequences. Which is about as real as it gets, right? It took a crazy story from thousands of years ago for me to realize that when we sin, when we fail to be what God has created and called us to be, we leave scars.

Last week in Sunday school we got into a discussion about confession and forgiveness. We're used to it being a corporate thing at the beginning of the service, but we have a service for individual confession, it's just that nobody ever stops by to do it. Sometimes people complain about Catholic Priests being present for confession, saying that we don't need someone in the way of our confession, but that's exactly what we have in our text today! The Israelites decided a long time ago that they needed an emissary between themselves and God, so they picked Moses. This text is the perfect biblical illustration of what confession is for! We're forced to look at our sin, as it's held up in front of us. For the Israelites that was a serpent on a pole, for us it's a man on a cross.

John 3:16 everybody, say it for me. That's right, no scripture is more well known than this passage from the Gospel of John. My internship supervisor, Rev. Rick Carter, always said that in order to get John 3:16, you need John 3:17.

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.

It's not God's mission to punish us, but to save us. We're not forced to look at our sin because it brings sadistic pleasure to God to see us in pain, but so that we can have our part in the eternal life that is promised.

In fact, we're the ones who have condemned ourselves.

“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.”

We had with us the God of the universe, in the body of a human being. In the person of Jesus Christ we had all the good that could ever exist, come to show us the way of mercy and love. And what do we do? We hang that God on a cross. We don't want that message, we don't want that revealing light. It's comfortable and safe in the darkness, we pretend. Our sins are hidden from the light.

But the darkness only holds death. So we're forced to look upon our sin on the cross. Upon the savior of the world all the sin was carried. It brought him death, the same death that was our destiny. But death will not have the last word. Something is happening, see God is about to do a new thing... so confess your sin, look upon the cross and be saved by the God of the whole universe. Amen.