

Fourth Sunday In Lent
March 14, 2021
Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson
Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: John 3:14-21

[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

The Israelites were walking through the barren wilderness. It was hot, it was dry, and the march had become monotonous. With the lack of signs of life, with the heat bearing down on them, and as their thirst began to grow, with aching bodies due to the walk, it was easy for the Israelites to forget about the gift of freedom they had received from God; it was easy to forget all the ways God had made sure their every need was met.

In the sin of their forgetfulness the Israelites began to utter complaints against both God and Moses. How easy it is to forget about the love and grace of God when we find ourselves in situations where it feels as though life has dealt us a terrible hand. How easy it is to want to place blame on others and on God when things are going wrong.



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To remind the Israelites of their sin, God sent deadly serpents into their camp. When bitten by a serpent, that particular Israelite would then perish. The reality of death seems to have a way of forcing us to confront our sin. And so, the Israelites turned from their sin, and remembering the mercy of God they confessed and asked for forgiveness. Now God, hearing their voices of repentance did something that the Israelites didn't expect.

God instructed Moses to fashion a serpent made of bronze and to raise it up in the middle of their camp. God then instructed Moses to tell the Israelites that, if they are bitten by a serpent, they are to look upon the bronze serpent and be healed. Now, what was unexpected by this means of salvation from God was that it required the Israelites to look upon their means of death. The very thing that would take their life away was the very thing they had to look at in order for their life to be spared.

Fast forward now to the time of Jesus as written by the author of the Gospel of John. In the gospel reading this morning, Jesus is having a conversation with a rabbi named Nicodemus. The part of this particular conversation that we hear this morning begins with Jesus telling Nicodemus that the Son of God must be lifted up like the bronze serpent in the wilderness so that those who look upon him may be saved. As we have seen and read before, and will come to face again on Good Friday, it is Jesus who will be lifted up, but not on a bronze statue. Instead, we know that Jesus will be raised up on a cross.

The cross. It was one of the most painful and horrible ways to be executed by the Roman authorities. The Romans used it as a means for people to be feared into submission. To look upon someone dying on a cross was to make a person come face to face with death. It has always been an astounding mystery as to why God would use such a means of death in order to bring new life to the cosmos.

To take a person's life is an ultimate act of sin. To crucify the Son of God is an ultimate act of sin. Yet again, in order for the world to be saved it must gaze upon its own sin; it must come face to face with Jesus raised up on the cross. God again makes humanity gaze upon its own means of death in order to be saved from death.

But unlike the bronze serpent in the wilderness, gazing upon the cross is to gaze upon the face of Jesus. To gaze upon the face of Jesus is to behold the love of God. The truth about the cross is not found in the way it was used as a means of death by human power, for looking into the



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face of Jesus on that cross brings light to the world. The death of Jesus is not the final straw that makes God condemn the world. Instead, it is the way for God to show us that not even death is strong enough to separate the world from God's love. It is as though God were saying to us, "Do you think the sin of killing my Son is enough to keep me from loving you? Go ahead and try, and I will show you how strong and unbreakable my love is for you."

There was a man named Roger who was on his way to visit the very man who had taken his teenage son's life; the man who had been driving drunk and hit his son's car in a head-on collision. Roger never got the chance to tell this man about all of the hurt, the pain, and the anger that he and his family felt at having to live with the death of his son. After all, the trial of the man who took his son's life was very short, because the man had pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to life in prison. Because of this, Roger was going to visit the man in prison so that he could finally yell at this man and make him wallow in his guilt and make him hurt the way Roger and his family were hurt.

After sitting in the room for a few minutes where Roger and the man guilty of murdering his son were to have their conversation, the guards opened the door and brought in the guilty prisoner. However, just as Roger opened his mouth to start yelling at the man, the man looked up at him with tears in his eyes. It was such a purposeful stare that it gave Roger pause, and he found that, for the moment, he couldn't speak.

The first words uttered in the room were not by Roger, but by the very man who had killed his son. The man said to Roger, "I know you probably came here to yell and scream at me, to share with me how much you must hate me for taking your son's life, to tell me that I deserve nothing but death, and you'd be right to say those things to me. But I want you to know that there is nothing that you could say to me that I haven't already said to myself. I have done a terrible thing to you and your family. Each day I am continuously haunted by what I did. Each night I cry myself to sleep because it is the only way I can withstand the guilt and shame that are in my heart. I won't ask for your forgiveness because I don't deserve it. Instead, I will sit here and I will listen to your hurt and your anger, and I will forever let those words sink into me, so that I will never forget them. That is the true punishment that I deserve."

The man finished talking, and Roger sat there processing what the man had just said to him. As the man's words began to sink in, Roger found that he could no longer make eye contact with the man. All of the sudden, Roger began to feel his own guilt begin to rise. It was clear now



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after hearing this man's words. Roger realized that he had let his own hatred of this man to fuel his heart. While Roger didn't want to forgive this man, he realized that his hatred of this man was beginning to destroy him.

Since the death of his son, Roger had begun to drink more; he became so depressed that he couldn't bring himself to live his life anymore. Roger had even thought about taking his own life at times. He had even toyed with the idea of asking to borrow his neighbor's hunting rifle so that he could commit suicide. All of this was due to his hatred of the man who killed his son. Roger had hoped that coming to yell at the man would help him move on from his hatred, but after hearing the man speak, Roger realized that it would've only created more hatred in his life.

After his first visit to the prison, Roger decided to come back once a month and get to know this man better. Along with many other things, Roger found out that the man's name was Peter. As Roger and Peter continued to converse and get to know each other better, a friendship began to blossom between them. It took a few years' worth of visits, but in the end, Roger was able to forgive Peter.

Sometimes, when we are in the thick of it, it can be hard for us to look up at Jesus and recognize our means of salvation. Often, I believe, when we look up at Jesus on the cross, we only recognize death, we only recognize the ways we have fallen short, the brokenness in our lives, and the shame of our sin. There are also those times when we are so angry at God, when we look upon Jesus on the cross, we feel vindicated in some way, welcoming his death. Finally, there are those times where we are so afraid of death that we abhor Jesus on the cross. We can't even stand to look at Jesus on the cross.

But here's the good news. No matter if we are feeling hatred towards God, no matter how broken and ashamed we may feel, no matter how many times we cower in fear, Jesus still dies on the cross for us. God's love for the world still overcomes death and brings about the joy of the empty tomb. Our salvation is secured, for that is how the grace and love of God works.

To look upon Jesus on the cross is to witness the light that breaks through the darkness. It is to witness the love of God breaking the chains that sin and death once used to keep a hold on us. It is to witness a whole new life taking shape, one that is free to love God and love neighbor.



The cross has become the main symbol for Christianity because it is the means of our salvation. Jesus on the cross is the means that brings us peace when there is hatred in our hearts. It brings us comfort when we are lonely. The cross gives us courage when we are afraid. It heals us when there is division. The cross gives us hope when we are in despair. All of this is because the cross points us back to that moment in time when God chose to show the world that God's love is unbendable, unbreakable, and unbelievable.

As we journey on in Lent, now is the time for us to gaze upon the cross raised up in our midst, and remember that there is where the love of God is truly revealed.

Amen.



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