

March 14th Worship
4th Sunday in Lent

Introduction to the Day

The fourth of the Old Testament promises providing a baptismal lens this Lent is the promise God makes to Moses: those who look on the bronze serpent will live. In today's gospel Jesus says he will be lifted up on the cross like the serpent, so that those who look to him in faith will live. When we receive the sign of the cross in baptism, that cross becomes the sign we can look to in faith for healing, for restored relationship to God, for hope when we are dying.

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,
the keeper of the covenant,
the source of steadfast love,
our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

God hears us when we cry, and draws us close in
Jesus Christ. Let us return to the one who is full of
compassion.

Silence is kept for reflection.

Fountain of living water,
pour out your mercy over us.
Our sin is heavy, and we long to be free.
Rebuild what we have ruined
and mend what we have torn.

Wash us in your cleansing flood.
Make us alive in the Spirit
to follow in the way of Jesus,
as healers and restorers of the world you so love.
Amen.

Beloved, God's word never fails.
The promise rests on grace:
by the saving love of Jesus Christ,
the wisdom and power of God,
your sins are † forgiven, and God remembers them
no more.

Journey in the way of Jesus.

Amen.

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.

Lesson – Numbers 21:4-9

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.

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.”

Message

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

We know this gospel text well. “For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, that whoever would believe in him would not perish, but have everlasting life.” - John 3:16.

We hear that, and for many of us the verse rolls right off of our tongues. It's a verse we hear so frequently, but so rarely hear what comes around it. We hear John 3:16 and the promise that if we believe in Jesus, we will have eternal life.

But, John 3, verse 16, comes in the context of a conversation that Jesus is having with someone that society would probably say doesn't deserve the promise that Jesus speaks of. And, Jesus is having this conversation with someone who probably thinks that same thing about many people in society.

But, Jesus tells Nicodemus there, under the cover of night, “God so loved the world that God gave God's only son that whoever would believe in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.”

So there is more to this gospel text. There is more to John chapter three than just verse 16. Verse 17 goes on. “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. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already.”

This “condemned” word is a big one. We hear condemnation and we likely immediately go to this thought of being condemned to hell for eternity. In our minds condemnation is a thing that sticks with us. There is no escaping condemnation. There is no escaping God's judgment. God's judgment is final and that's it. And, if you've been condemned then that is it.

But.

But Jesus tells Nicodemus who, again, is someone society was not a fan of – and the feeling is likely mutual – that “those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already.” This may seem to have some finality to it. This may seem, as we hear this, like there is no escaping it.

But.

Jesus doesn't say those who do not believe are condemned forever. Does he? Jesus is talking in the present tense, or even the past tense. Those who do not live in this life of belief and knowing and trusting all that God is up to, and what Jesus brings into the world, that not living in that promise is the condemnation.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that condemnation isn't final.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that there's hope for you.

This is God's grace in this gospel text.

That Jesus doesn't say, "because you don't believe that's it for you," but rather he says "you are living in your non-belief and that your condemnation. You have condemned yourself, but not forever."

For God so loved the WHOLE world (and John's Gospel will go on to show us what Jesus means by the WHOLE world) that God gave God's only Son that whoever would believe would not perish, but have eternal life."

We revisit again our roller coaster experience that is life as people of faith. Where we start at our baptism, the epitome of hopefulness, washed clean in the waters of baptism, and eventually we come down into this wilderness journey. We find Nicodemus in that wilderness journey of the rollercoaster.

In fact, we find him on his way out of it. He senses something. He senses there's a conversation that needs to happen. It says at the beginning of John chapter three, "now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus. He was a man of pride and entitlement. A leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him..." Notice that Jesus doesn't seek him out, but it's the other way around?

This gospel text, this story, is a story of repentance, and the role that repentance plays in this whole rollercoaster as a life of people of faith. Nicodemus came to Jesus. Yes, by the cover of night, which is symbolic, he knows there are things about him that he would rather remain unseen and unknown, and he knows that the one he comes – Jesus – knows those things. And, Jesus knows that Nicodemus knows that Jesus knows those things! And this conversation happens with Nicodemus on his way out the wilderness low of his journey.

On his way out of that wilderness, he finds himself struggling with the unsettling newness of Jesus. This is where we are at in John 3:16 and the verses around it. Jesus and Nicodemus are having this conversation as Nicodemus is struggling with the up and down of this unsettling newness that is Jesus Christ.

That Jesus tells him you've been living in condemnation, but that is not final for you.

That Jesus tells him that in his belief he will come to the light.

Jesus is urging him to step out of the unknown and into the light. "Come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that your deeds have been done in God."

This is God's grace that Jesus is speaking into this moment.

Come to the light and see the new life that is for you in Jesus Christ.

We hear these words, condemnation and judgment and eternal, and we apply them to ourselves. We know the things that we would rather people not know about us. And, when we hear that God so loved God's world that God gave God's Son for us," we think it couldn't possibly be true.

We know the depths of ourselves that so few others know about us. We hear this gospel text and we believe that it puts us in this wilderness of condemnation, in this wilderness of judgment, that in our mind is where eternity is.

But.

In Jesus Christ, we come out of that and we go through the unsettling nature of the peaks and valleys of getting to that moment of new life, where we realize the love of God in Jesus Christ that is for us.

“For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son that whoever would believe in him would not perish, but have eternal life. Those who believe are not condemned. But those who do not believe are living in condemnation.”

The condemnation is that not living into the promise and the new life that is Jesus Christ, but there is that new life in Jesus Christ. There is that thing that pulls us out of the depths of the wilderness and says there is newness and new life for you. In the waters of baptism we are washed clean daily and daily we are made new. And, that one day we would realize that newness and new life that is for us in Jesus Christ, and we would live free from condemnation.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Apostle's Creed

Prayers

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

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 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi and the Mitundu Parish, 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. 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. Give us patience and courage when the way seems long. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

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.

Offering

Offertory Prayer

Faithful God,

you walk beside us in desert places, and you meet us in our hunger with bread from heaven. Accompany us in this meal, that we may pass over from death to life with Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

You are what God made you to be:
created in Christ Jesus for good works,
chosen as holy and beloved,
freed to serve your neighbor.

God bless you ✠ that you may be a blessing,
in the name of the holy and life-giving Trinity.

Amen.

Go in peace. Share the good news. **Thanks be to God.**

ANNOUNCEMENTS! ANNOUNCEMENTS! ANNOUNCEMENTS!

A Communal Fast from the Sacrament of Holy Communion

We will be taking a communal fast from the Sacrament of Holy Communion for the Season of Lent. The next time we will take communion as a community of faith will be on Maundy Thursday, when we remember the night in which Jesus first gave this meal.

Re-Connect Opportunities will be starting again THIS WEEK!

We hope you will join us for any, or all, of these Re-Connect Opportunities throughout the week!

Stop in for coffee and conversation at 9 am on Mondays

TUESDAYS be sure to stop by for Bible Study starting at 11, followed by Lunch and Laughter at noon.

Wednesdays will continue to be our Faith Formation Days

Thursdays we will have the sanctuary open for prayer for 8 am to 3 pm.