

Lent 4, March 14, 2021 (Jo 3:14-21; Ps 107:1-3, 17-22; Num 21:4-9; Eph 2:1-10)

SERMON

The holy gospel according to John, the 3rd chapter.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, ***“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”*** ***For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*** ***Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the judgment: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.*** The gospel of the Lord.

Last Sunday our psalm ended with these words: **Who can discern their errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression** (Ps 19:12-13).

How often do we sin and not even realize it? Rarely do I set out to be “willfully” sinful! Not like the good old days in the early 1500’s when the Roman Catholic Church was selling indulgences: You want to commit adultery next week? No problem! Just throw 5,000 *kroner* in the box and you’ll be forgiven!

Maybe it would be better if there were more poisonous serpents in the world!

Let me rephrase that: I wish all our sins today were as obvious as the bite of the poisonous serpents in the wilderness 3500 years ago. Those serpents were God’s punishment for the people who were whining and complaining as Moses led them towards the Promised Land. Like, “There’s no bread! There’s no water! And the manna is terrible!” -- Huh? That’s the *bread of angels* you’re complaining about!

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God got tired of their ingratitude and sent the serpents among them. Then, when the people acknowledged their sin and asked God to take the serpents away, God relented. He didn't *remove* the serpents—but he *did* provide a way out. Anyone who was bitten had only to look at the *bronze* serpent Moses set upon a pole, and that person would not die, but live.

How blessed we would be if we could identify our sinfulness so easily! Then we could immediately seek the healing that comes only from looking to *Jesus*, lifted up on the cross!

God gave the Ten Commandments, and Moses passed them on to the people. If they followed these, God said, their lives would be filled with blessing: he would be their God, and they would be his people.

The Bible is a written testimony to how badly they failed in their obedience—and how deeply God loved them anyway. So much so that he forgave them—and forgives us—time after time after time.

But we've lost touch with the holiness and will of God. Sometimes it's hard to recognize the many ways in which we fail to honor him, love him, and have no other gods before him. Such "gods" can consist of anything from leisure time to a job, from worshiping our own possessions (or coveting those of others) to turning away from those who are most needy—you know, the ones Jesus cared for.

Maybe if we had poisonous serpents to bite us occasionally, we'd remember how desperately we need the healing that comes only through the cross of Christ. As it is, we often fail even to *see*, let alone *seek*, God's salvation, so freely offered for the whole world.

God's intention for *everyone* is *eternal life*. God's plan for the *whole world* is *salvation*. **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... (John 3:17-18). And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.

We live in a time of darkness! The darkness of the coronavirus, with all the deaths and other losses it's caused. The darkness of political chaos, hardly less now than before the new administration took over. The darkness of increasing homelessness and crime; the darkness of random shootings and terror. The darkness, as I write this, of not knowing how the trial of George Floyd's murderer will end, and the darkness of knowing there will be unrest and riots either way.

We live in a darkness where we or our loved ones are dying, or hospitalized, or suffering from debilitating illness or depression, abuse or addiction, fear or guilt or shame. A darkness where the values of the world are promoted so loudly, it's hard to hear the voice of God. A darkness where the power of sin overwhelms, and faithfulness to God is mocked on the one hand and perverted on the other. Thank God that ***God so loved the world!***

We need help now, as we've never needed it before! But so many people are looking for help in all the wrong places! There are serpents all around, biting us, killing us bit by bit by bit, and if we're aware of it at all, we're not looking to the only salvation the world will ever know: Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, nailed to the cross by our sins, by our sinfulness.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that everyone who believes in him may not *perish*, but may have eternal life. . . . And this is the judgment: that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

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Evil is a strong word. Hardly anyone sets out to do evil deeds. But sometimes things that begin innocently or thoughtlessly can drift towards the side of wickedness.

When we look to Jesus on the cross with thankful hearts, we can't help but live in the light that draws forth *good works*—*good works* which **God prepared beforehand to be our way of life**, as we heard in Ephesians.

We do these good works *not* to be saved, *not* to try to earn our salvation, but because a heart given to Jesus can't help but bring his light and love and salvation to all the world.

By the same token, those who fail to see Christ on the cross in their place **judge themselves** by refusing the salvation he offers. God doesn't need to condemn them, because they already live in the darkness of sin.

In the biblical sense, *faith* is both a matter of the *heart*, of trusting and loving God. But it's also a matter of *living according to the good and gracious will of God*—a matter of *obedience*. My life of faith is revealed by the choices I make, the values by which I order my life, the words I say, the attitudes I hold on to, as well as the deeds I do. All these are outward signs that Jesus is the true Lord of my life.

When I was in high school I told my pastor I wasn't sure I believed in God, and he asked me if I *wanted* to. When I said *yes*, he told me the best way to begin was to *act as if I believed*. He said the opposite of *faith* isn't *doubt*, but *disobedience*.

Over the years I tried to make choices and decisions in accord with God's will, and I found that the pastor's advice was working. My faith relationship with God deepened.

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Gradually I found that my actions were being done not to prove my faith, but out of a thankful response to God, **who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son to die so the whole world could be saved.**

Friends in Christ, today's gospel text reminds us we have a choice: light or darkness, salvation or condemnation, evil or truth, love or hate. Why would we want to choose things that draw us away from God?

The world is sick with sin, but **God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him—or even *wants* to believe in him—may not perish, but may have eternal life.**

You are part of that *everyone*, and there's a whole world waiting for you to share the light of God's love.

Thanks be to God!