

Lent 4 3/11/18
John 3:14-21 B

AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS, SO MUST THE SON OF MAN BE LIFTED UP

What makes Christianity different from all the other religions in the world? I ask you that because we live in a world that would have us believe all religions are the same. In fact, I'm certain you have heard something like this: "You know, when you get to the bottom line, all religions basically teach the same thing and all lead to the same heaven."

In our Gospel, Jesus teaches us this is a lie of the devil. Let me say that again – this silly notion that all religions teach the same thing and lead to the same heaven is a lie of the devil. What makes Christianity different is that all the other religions of the world teach salvation by works – it's all about you – what you do or what you do not do. You have to save yourself. Christianity is about Jesus, what He has done and still does for us and for our salvation. This, we learn in our Gospel reading this Sunday, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life" (vv. 14-15).

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness." That's our Old Testament lesson this morning. God delivered the Israelites from the land of death. He opened His hand to keep them alive. But, it wasn't long before they became impatient, angry, and thankless towards the gifts of God. They grumbled – against God, against Moses; they even thought they had life better under the heavy hand of their Egyptian masters. To drive His children back to contrition and faith, God sent fiery serpents to bite the people. Deadly, toxic venom flowed through their veins. They confessed and cried to their intercessor Moses. Moses prayed, and God spoke,

instructing His servant to set a bronze serpent on a pole that came with the divine promise that everyone bitten, when they gaze at that bronze serpent, would live. Think about that for a moment – in their dying anguish, looking to any god, clinging to a god of their own design, would not have saved them. God instructed them to look at that serpent and nothing else, so that they would be saved.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus uses this Old Testament account to point us to Himself. As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up on the cross so that people would believe in Him and have eternal life.

You need to look to Jesus because you have poison flowing through your veins. Scripture calls it sin. The venom of sin has poisoned your heart and it shows in your thoughts, words, and deeds.

You would probably never even think of reading the Book of Mormon or the Quran, let alone believing it. We Lutherans stand firmly that the Bible is not just another book; it's the infallible Word of God. Yet ... we are quick to doubt God's promises in it. We are quite quick to ignore those parts of it that we don't like, that conflict with the way we want to live our lives.

Profanity seems to be just part of everyday speech anymore. The sad part about it? Not only do we routinely use profanity, we are not terrified that we have sinned against God, for God "will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name."

God says that we are not to murder. We would never even think of going on a shooting rampage, murdering our neighbor. But, we stay angry at our neighbor, wish harm and ruin on them. And, when something bad happens to them, we inwardly delight, "It's about time they got theirs!"

God says “You shall not steal.” “You’re # 1!” the world says. “Greed is good.” So, we lie, steal, cheat, cut down our neighbor with vicious, savage words to get ahead, and see nothing wrong with it.

“You shall not commit adultery.” Do I even need to talk about this Commandment? First, the world said there was nothing wrong with sex outside of marriage. Now, the world cries that two homosexuals who “love” each other can be married. And, regardless of what we said the day of our confirmation, we’ve bought into it. We find off-color jokes just as humorous as unbelievers. If you’ve watched any movie lately, you probably witnesses open disregard of marriage. Were you outraged? Let me remind you that God was.

The season of Lent again reminds us that the Christian life is the life of repentance. We are sorrowful for our sin and we look in faith to Jesus for forgiveness and life. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life” (vv. 14-15).

Then, Jesus speaks the words of perhaps the most treasured verse in the Bible, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son”. God’s showed His love for us poor sinners by sending His only-begotten Son to save us.

All those times you grew impatient, angry, and thankless towards the gifts of God; all those times you grumbled against God; all those times the sin in your heart showed itself in your thoughts, words, or deeds; were all laid on God’s only-begotten Son and He carried them to the cross. There, He suffered and died the punishment and death we deserved. We are saved by Jesus dying on the cross. The Bible says it this way, “God shows

his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Ro 5:8).”

The Christian faith holds firmly to the teaching that we are saved by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith because it gives enduring comfort to penitent sinner.

You have something in common with those Israelites in our Old Testament lesson. The word “Israelite” means “wanderer”. You, Dear Child of God, are a wanderer on this side of heaven. You know that truth from the much-loved hymn, “I’m but a stranger here”.

And, as we journey through this valley of the shadow of death, we grow impatient with God and we loathe His gifts. We question our vocations and think God has abandoned us to die in the wilderness when affliction comes our way. And, that venom of sin coursing through our veins causes us to rebel and grumble against God and rage against the promises of His Word.

My Dear Friends in Christ, God has not left us in the darkness of sin and death. In a world filled with false doctrines, false beliefs and false prophets, lies and deceit; God’s Word is certain and true. Christ is the Light by whom our sins are exposed and forgiven by His blood. Coming into His light, we confess, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief,” and He does. Through the absolution and eating and drinking His true Body and Blood, He forgives, and strengthens the faith He began at our baptism, so that we look to Jesus.

It is important that we look in faith to Jesus, because if you judge God’s love for you based on how you feel, or on what happens to you every week, then, honestly, it is easy to conclude, God must not love me because of the suffering I’m having to endure, or the feelings I feel. Circumstances

and emotions change with the wind. Look to Christ, lifted high up on the cross, and see something unchangeable and eternal, sure and certain for you -- a promise of God that through Christ you will not perish, but have eternal life.

Jesus bore all of your sin to the tree of the cross and crushed that ancient serpent. All your trials, all your tribulations and affliction, sickness, disease and even death itself have been overcome by your Savior Jesus who gives you eternal life.