

Written Copy: John 3:16-19 "This Is How God Loves You"

4th Sunday in Lent

Sunday, March 14th, 2021

Text: John 3:16-19

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

Exegetical Statement

Jesus is explaining to Nicodemus why a person must be "born from above" in order to even see, let alone participate in the reign and rule of God. He uses the Old Testament example from Numbers 21:4-9. The Israelites sinned by not trusting God was caring for their needs, and thus developed thankless sinful hearts. The LORD gave them an illustration of how sin had poisoned their minds and spirits by having poisonous snakes bite them. This caused them to repent and cry out to the Lord for salvation. The LORD answered by putting the cause of their suffering and dying up on a pole, symbolic of their sin being made to die. By looking with eyes of faith in the LORD's salvation provided for them, they were healed. In the same way, Jesus had to be lifted up on the pole that is the cross, and be for us the poison of our sin being put to death, so that, when we look upon Him through the eyes of faith, we will not die eternally, but instead enjoy life with Him now and eternal life to come. And the means by which we can look upon Him in faith comes to us through the washing regeneration of the water and the Word of Baptism. But Jesus was not like the snakes, He was not sent to be judgment upon the world. He is the Father's gift of love, a love that is beyond understanding, without conditions or limits, and is for the whole entire human race. He came to be the cure for the sins of every single human being. All men are born into the world already under the judgment of sin. They live in the darkness of sin where they are comfortable doing the deeds of darkness. Those who continue in a life lived in darkness, refusing to believe in Christ as Savior, remain under that judgment, and their death seals it. But all those who look to Jesus as their Savior are saved through faith in Him. They live in the light of divine truth and their deeds are testimony to their trust in Jesus alone.

Focus Statement:

Rather than seeing Him as the God of wrath we are to see Him as the God of infinite merciful love. This was shown to us by His sending His One and Only Son to be the sacrifice for sin on the cross, the antidote that reverses the poison of sin that causes death. It comes to us as His free gift of faith and changes our lives so that we have a new birth, born from above to live in the light of divine truth.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

In the season of Lent, as we focus upon our sinful nature, we can begin to see God as the angry God who is never happy with us. In our Old Testament Lesson it appears to be the God who was so angry by the complaining Israelites that He sent snakes to make them suffer in order to appease His wrath. We can see Him as reluctantly forgiving us when we confess, tolerating us for now. But we live in fear that one more sin may be the straw that breaks the camel's back. Our relationship to Him becomes more like the rebellious child that always angers his parents.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Live in the light of the divine truth of God's merciful and unending love. See His work of wrath and punishment not as what He loves to do but what He must do as the God of justice. See that those who are condemned eternally are so because they refuse His free gift of the antidote. Rest assured that Christ's antidote covers us from now until eternal life.

Subject Sentence: Our God of Love Gives Us the Antidote For Sin

In Lent and the World: Seeing God as Wrathful

Well here we are at beginning of the 4th week of Lent: the penitential season where we focus on how our lives look from God's perspective, which means we focus on the sin that is both evident before our eyes as well as that sin that we try to hide away from others, and even ourselves. The season where we open up some the dark closets in our hearts to let what is in there be exposed to the light of God's truth. So how does that work in your life make you feel about now? How does it make you feel about God? Are you tempted to see our God whose desire it is to break open those closets and drag those sins out into the light as a wrathful vengeful God?

So far in our Midweek Lenten Series we've talked about our lackadaisical prayer life, how we break our promises to one another and to our God, and the way in which we fail to speak up in defense of one another but instead join in the gossip and character bashing that is going on around us in the world. Perhaps you're beginning to wonder if there is anything you do that actually pleases Him. Maybe you feel that He's like the loved one or spouse who is so critical that what you do never seems to be good enough. Perhaps for you He's like the boss who is never pleased with your performance, the kind that always finds something to rake you over the coals about. Perhaps you're starting to feel crushed by the weight of the sin He is pointing out to you in His Word.

And then there's everything going on in the world around us, COVID-19, racial unrest starting back up, corruption in politics, severe weather, things that some voices claim are God pouring out His punishment and wrath upon us as a country because we no longer subscribe to Christian morals. Voices that claim these are signs that He's done caring about us, done loving us, preparing to exit stage left. Voices that claim these are examples of what some people see as the Old Testament God of wrath and vengeance instead the God of love and mercy. If this is how your feeling, crushed by the weight of it all, then today's Scripture Lessons and Sermon is for you. And for me. It's what we all need to hear.

God's Work of Grace and Mercy in Our Old Testament Lesson

At first blush our Old Testament Lesson seems to give evidence to the God of wrath characterization. We see Israel is still wandering in the wilderness, almost at the end of their 40-year period. They are finally heading to the Promised Land. But instead of taking the direct route from where they are, God diverts them out and around the nation of Edom, making the trip longer and farther. **Numbers 21:4b-5^{4b} And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ And the 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 loathe this worthless food."** During the last 40 years they've lived on mostly manna to eat. Water has at times been scarce. They are looking forward to this Promised Land where there will be fresh water and tasty food for all of them, and they're tired of waiting for it. So now that the trip has just become longer, they grumble and complain, just like you and I would in their shoes. And how does God respond? **Numbers 21:6 Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.** On the surface this looks like the work of the God of wrath and vengeance. They made Him angry, and He strikes back, getting even with them for their complaining.

But let's look at this from God's point of view. The people had to wander for 40 years in the desert because when God first told them back at Mt. Sinai that it was time to enter the Promised Land, they said no. They had scouted the land and saw huge people and huge walled cities. God told them He would go before them and fight for them. Still they sinfully disobeyed and refused to go. They refused the gift that God wanted to give them. If God truly was a vengeful and wrathful God, He would've struck them down right there on the spot. But instead He forgave them and chose to remain with them for their 40 years of wilderness wandering. These 40-years were the consequence their sins had brought on. During those 40-years God was teaching them to trust in Him as their Redeemer, Protector, and Provider. So when our Old Testament Lesson starts, we see they are still alive. He's still graciously providing the food and water they need, just not in the manner and quantity they want.

Numbers 21:7 And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. God sent the snakes among them, not out of wrath or anger, but out of love. He saw that in their sinful complaining they were wandering away from Him in faith. If He didn't love them, He would've just let them go. Maybe let them head on up into Edom and be slaughtered. Or He would've watched them all die in agony from the snake's poisonous bite. Or just left them to wander forever in the wilderness, or be slaughtered as they tried to enter the Promised Land by themselves. But the snakes served an important purpose, to show the Israelites their sin, that they had been speaking evil against their God, and to move them to turn back to Him in repentant faith, which they did. They turned back and cried out for God to save them, confessing that He is the only One who could do so.

And God's response? **Numbers 21:8-9** ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. We see God responding not in anger, but in love and mercy for a group of people who didn't earn it or deserve it. He gave them something better than an antidote for snake venom. He put the source of their death, represented by the bronze snake, up on a pole. He symbolically crucified the source of their death. And all who looked at this symbol, and believed in God's promised healing were saved. That's God showing great love and patience for a people undeserving of it. Rather than being a God of wrath this is the God who loves to heal and to save.

God Desires to Love and Save

This is the God in human form that is speaking in **John 3:14-15** ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. As we draw closer to Good Friday, where we will read through the Old Testament and New Testament descriptions of what Jesus suffered on Good Friday, you may see these things as the hand of the wrathful vengeful God at work. But Jesus words here direct us to view it in a different light. Just as Moses had to lift up that bronze serpent on the pole in order for Israel to be saved, even so, Jesus had to be lifted up on the pole of suffering that was the cross so you and I could be saved, both now and eternally. He was the reason that snake on a pole brought healing. He is the reason we are healed today.

Instead of wrathful and vengeful, how should we see our God's response to sin? He is the God of justice. He is the source of our desire to seek justice when someone commits a crime against us or our family. One of the repeated cries I heard from many after the storming of the Capital building on January 6th was the cry for justice. That comes from God, who is a just God. He demands that sin be punished. He warned Adam and Eve that the price for disobedience would be death, death in this world and eternal separation from Him. He warns you and I in **Romans 6:23a** **"For the wages of sin is death"** And as those who can't stop sinning, we are described in **Ephesians 2:1** **"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins."** We were dead, dying from the spiritual and physical poison that is sin. If our God was a wrathful and vengeful God, He would just leave it at that and watch all of us dig our own graves and jump right in.

But He's not. We hear the rest of the story in **Romans 6:23b** **"but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."** And what do we see in this free gift? God's extraordinary love. **John 3:16a** **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,"**. God so loved the world, or better yet, God loved the world in this way: He gave to us who were undeserving what was most precious to Him, His only Son. Paul helps us understand this in **Ephesians 2:4-5** **⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ---by grace you have been saved---** His love is a great and powerful love, surpassing our ability to comprehend or understand. It is filled with mercy, the desire to do kind, gracious, and beneficial acts to those who are undeserving. It is a love that desires not to destroy or kill, but to heal and build up. It is a love that comes swooping in to save those who could never save themselves. It is a love that moved the creator of the universe to come down and become one of us in order to suffer in your place your punishment for your sins so that you would never have to. And He chose to do it out of love, love for you. It's a love with supernatural power that can change those who were dead in their trespasses and sins and make them alive again. It's a love that brings everlasting life. It is a love greater than we can manufacture in our own hearts, it can only come from our God who Himself is love.

How does this gift of grace and love come to you personally? It is given by Christ Himself through the means He has chosen to be His agent of delivery. **John 3:5-6** ⁵ **Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.** This gracious gift came just a little while ago to Braxton and Kyle in the rebirth that is their baptism. It came to you in the rebirth that is your baptism. The Spirit brought that gift of gracious forgiveness to you and deposited it in your life, giving you the gift of faith so that you can hold on to Christ as your Lord and Savior. As Paul testifies in **Ephesians 2:8-9** ⁸ **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** The gracious and loving gift of salvation in Christ Jesus comes to you by His free gift of faith. It's not something you earned or deserved, but you have it nonetheless. It's the gift of love from your God of love. And through the ongoing work that is your baptism His Spirit is renewing that gift every time you hear the Gospel of Jesus death and resurrection.

Seeing Our Lives as His Gift of Love

Jesus calls this gracious gift given in Baptism being "born again" or "born from above." Either way, it gives us a new way to look at the world and our life in it. It makes us see many of the problems that arise in our life and our times of suffering as having a purpose, just as those snakes had a purpose for the Israelites. It's God's way of calling us back when we are headed toward unbelief. As pointed out in **John 3:18** **Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.** We are born in sin and condemned to eternal hell. In baptism Christ enters our life and saves us from that fate through His gift of faith that grants us the salvation earned by Him on the cross. Those who believe by this gift of faith will not be condemned, even though they sin. That sin is washed away and forgiven. Eternal life remains theirs. But when we fall into not recognizing our sin, or when we fail to recognize that we are "by nature sinful and unclean", we are headed toward giving up that gift of faith. We are headed toward the eternal condemnation that Christ died to save us from. Jesus loves us too much to stand by and allow that to happen. So He allows just enough pain and suffering so that we turn back to Him in faith, just as the Israelites did. He allows just enough suffering to keep us in faith through the continued washing and cleansing of our Baptism. All this because He loves you so much He doesn't want to see you lost forever

Conclusion

Having our sins pointed out to us during Lent is not pleasant. In fact it sometimes hurts. But God doesn't do this because He's had a bad day, or because He gets malicious enjoyment out of demeaning people. He does it with your eternal salvation in mind. He does it out of a love that He has for you which is not based on who you are or what you've done, but solely on who He is as Your Creator and Redeemer. His Spirit points you to your sin so that He can then point to your Savior. He shows you how awful the sin in your heart is so that in contrast He can show you how great is the gift of salvation you have through faith in Jesus Christ. He shows you how wonderful is His love for you. His desire is not to punish you, but that you spend an eternity getting to know Him and exactly how much He loves You. He is God the Son, Your Savior, who gave the most precious thing He had to save you, His life. Amen.