

Seeing Snakes on Crosses

Lent Rotation 2017

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John 3:14-21

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

We are rebellious people. There's no two ways about it. God has told us what He would have us do, yet we do not do it. I don't do it, and you don't do it. I don't think as I should, and neither do you. They say if you don't know history, you are doomed to repeat it—yet when it comes to sin, even knowing history will not prevent you from having problems with it.

As you know, in the Old Testament, God's people rebelled time and again. And time and again, God would show mercy. One such time was when the Israelites were in the wilderness. They complained 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.' Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many of the people of Israel died."

Time and again, the people of earth have rebelled against their Creator—but what is more, the people God has chosen, those set apart by Him, whether the people of Israel or those of the Church, have rebelled against Him and His ways.

It does not take a symbol like the ashes on your foreheads to see that this is true. Just look at your works, your thoughts, your words, your desires. Have they been in line with God's will?

But while it does not take a symbol to show our transgressions, we do have a symbol of what God would do about our sin. It is located at the front of the Chapel of St. Timothy and Titus at the Seminary in St. Louis. If you walk all the way to the front you'd find a large, glass cross. Inside the glass you would see two wavy squiggles connected in the shape of another cross. Believe it or not, those two squiggles represent our Lord Jesus on the cross. Looking at this unusual cross, you might wonder why the two wavy pieces are used instead of a human shaped figure. Our Gospel text for this evening answers that very question.

The cross of which I'm speaking connects the two testaments of Scripture and the two time periods of human history in the same way our text does. Jesus refers back to Numbers to one of the times the Israelites had turned from God and He sent fiery serpents which began biting them so that they would die. Once the people of Israel began to die, they realized that they had sinned against the Lord and turned back to Him. Then God had Moses make a serpent of bronze to be put up high. Whenever one of the Israelites would look at that bronze serpent, trusting the Word God had given to Moses that whoever looked at it would not die, that Israelite would be healed. And so our Lord says this evening: "(A)s 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."

Most if not all of you can speak the next verse of our text from memory. So we continue through John 3:16 and come to verse 17. My guess is that many of you can also recall what John wrote here. But how many of you know what comes after verses sixteen and seventeen? Well, let's look: "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."

There you have it: the dichotomy that our world hates. Believers vs. unbelievers. There is no middle ground. There is no what is good for someone else is good for him or her, but doesn't affect me. God's Word affects us all. His Word affects you; every aspect of you.

Are there things you do during the week that you would be ashamed to confess to your pastor in private? I don't mean embarrassing things, I mean sinful things. They have been forgiven in your confession. But, are you now plotting to go home and do them again? Are there words in your vocabulary you use freely except when your pastor is around? Again, if you honestly confessed these earlier, they have been forgiven. But, are you planning to continue their use even after this service?

Are you like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness with Moses, turning away from the Lord your God whenever things go well for you? If so, "this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and

(you have) loved the darkness rather than the light because (your works are) evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.”

Yes even we as believers in Christ sometimes, or even often, desire to shy away from the light. We know that what we do is evil, and we don't want our misdeeds exposed in the light of our Lord. We are not alone in this. We can recall Isaiah in the throne room of God, saying “Woe is me.” We can also recall Peter's initial reaction to His Lord's calling. At the beginning of Luke, Jesus instructed Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered that they had been trying all night long with no catch, but since Jesus was his Master, they lowered the nets. No sooner had they done this than their nets were overloaded—so much so that they began to sink. When Peter saw it, he could do no other than respond, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

If confronted by our Lord, I have no doubt that we would be able to do no other. When lighted by our Lord Jesus' presence, we would become afraid because of our sinfulness. By our works, even as believers, like Isaiah and Peter, we cannot hope to hold a flicker to the light of purity that God's Law requires.

How can any of us, then, come to the light by doing what is true? After all, that's what Jesus said in closing His discussion with Nicodemus: “whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Of our own power, we are incapable of doing anything good, or right, or true. We are dying from the poison of the serpent of the Garden of Eden. That is why it was by the love of God the Father that Jesus was given for us—it had to be. By His gift, the Israelites of old could look to the bronze serpent lifted up and be saved. And by His gift, we may look at our Lord Jesus Christ lifted up on the cross of Calvary and confess, so that we may know that we have the forgiveness of sins declared to us on account of His death on that cross.

Because Jesus was lifted up for you, you may now receive His forgiveness in the means of grace. His death in your place made it so that you could receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at your baptism. Today the Holy Spirit is working in you so that you may believe, and so that you may go to the light and receive the forgiveness Christ earned for you. You receive that forgiveness in the absolution of your confessed sins, and you receive it when you partake of Jesus' very body and very blood in Holy Communion. But what is more, you also receive the power of the Holy Spirit to come to the light and to confess your sins so that you might receive Christ's forgiveness with the open hands of faith.

In this way, there is no condemnation for you. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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.” That you, might be saved through Him. In Jesus' Name. Amen.