

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Lent 4B
March 14, 2021
John 3:14-21

A Matter of Life and Death

“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.” (John 3:14-15 ESV)

Dearly Beloved,

The words “a matter of life and death” can bring terror to the heart as the gravity of a situation reveals itself. Certainly our military deals with this on a daily basis. As do our safety forces - those who serve in the police and fire departments - especially in times of rescue. Doctors may describe the necessity of a certain procedure or medication as a matter of life and death. And while the expression may be used of less serious matters, most often it is used of a truly critical moment in someone’s life.

Today, our Lord truly speaks of a matter of life and death. For He speaks to us of His death and our life. He speaks of faith, saving faith, faith which trusts God’s Word and promise. And this is most certainly a matter of life and death.

In the Old Testament reading (Num. 21:4-9), we heard of a matter of life and death which faced the Israelites. God had delivered them out of bondage in Egypt and had graciously provided for all their needs. But the people had grown tired of His gifts. They desired something other than what He had given them. They began to complain and grumble against God and against Moses. They longed for “the good, old days” when they were slaves in Egypt. “So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died” (Num. 21:6). When this brought the people to realize their sin, they cried out for mercy. According to God’s command, Moses erected a bronze serpent on a pole, and all who were bitten and looked at the serpent lived. God had provided salvation. It was available to all. No one was excluded from the promise. Yet, it was not the snake on the pole which saved them. Rather it was God Himself and His promise. Their salvation was a result only of God’s grace and mercy. They had done nothing to deserve it. In this matter of life and death, God gave them life. Yet, if anyone who was bitten was so foolish as to refuse to look upon that serpent, he died, and it was totally his own fault.

So it is with Christ. As He here speaks of His crucifixion, His being raised up on the cross, He declares, “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” Nothing could be more a matter of life and death than this.

Now we may not face the bites of “fiery serpents”, but we have been bitten by the ancient serpent, Satan. As a result, all mankind is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Not one person is excluded. We are all doomed to die, not only in this life, but most certainly in eternity. As a result of our sin, our living in the passions of our flesh, our carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, our being by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:3), we deserve eternal death in the fires of hell. Nothing could be more a matter of life and death.

Yet, God, in His mercy saves us, while we were dead in trespasses and sins, while we were yet His enemies and children of wrath, even before and without our call. Indeed, we can't call because we are dead, spiritually dead. We are in such a sad state of affairs that we don't want to be saved. We want nothing to do with God. But that doesn't stop Him from saving us.

And, oh, how He saved us. He gave His “only-begotten Son” to be raised up on the pole of the cross. And as we look at that pitiable sight by faith, we are saved from the snake-bite of sin and death. For the One raised up is none other than the Son of God Himself. The One who hangs dying is true Man, though holy and blameless, without any sin of His own. This God/Man is God's gift to the world to save it from her sin. As He took the sin of the world upon Himself, Jesus became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). He endured the full wrath of God over sin for us. In His death, He gives life.

And the life He gives is the life of the world (John 6:51). His crucifixion has cosmic results. For in Jesus' being lifted up, the whole world has been forgiven. Not one person is excluded or left out. Not one sin is excluded, no matter how heinous or grievous it may be. There is *no* sin which falls outside of the forgiveness purchased and won by Jesus as He was lifted up, as He gave His life, on the cross. God's grace is universal, it is for everyone. Salvation is truly a matter of life and death - Christ's death for our life.

Yet, sadly, not everyone benefits from this wonderful gift from God. For there are many who, in unbelief, refuse and reject it. Though they have been forgiven, they refuse God's gift saying, in effect, “I don't want it. I don't need it. I'd rather do it myself,” if they even care about eternity at all. Yet, such a response of unbelief has terrible consequences. The first of which is condemnation. Jesus says, “Whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (John 3:18). The second consequence of such unbelief is that having rejected the Light of the world, he remains in the darkness. For, you see, in the things of God there is only darkness and light. A person is either of the Light, that is to say, he is of Christ, or he is of the darkness. There is no gray area. Whoever rejects Christ is condemned already and he remains in the darkness. The third consequence is that “the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36), that is, the just vengeance of God remains on his shoulders. He is without hope, and without God in the world. He truly doesn't have a prayer. A person who thus rejects God's gift or wants to do it himself has no one to blame but himself when he is damned to hell for eternity.

You see, salvation is a matter of life and death, and there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. That's why salvation is strictly a matter of God's grace in Christ Jesus. That's what today's Epistle reading tells us. As I read it again, notice who is at work,

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- 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 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. (Eph. 2:4-9).

Yes, my friends, salvation is God's work, 100 percent. That we look to Jesus, that we believe in Him, is also God's gift to us. We can't take any credit for it. Thus we need to be careful not to turn God's grace into our work. You see, it would be easy to put our confidence in our *believing* rather than in our Savior. It would be easy to turn our faith into a good work, as though it is something *we* do. But God makes it very clear that our salvation is entirely in His hands, and is entirely His work and His gift. He not only "gave His only begotten Son;" He also gives you the faith by which you believe, that is, trust in Him for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

In your Baptism, you see just how much a matter of life and death sin is. For you died in that holy water and were raised to a new life as saving faith was created in you. In Christ you were brought from death to life, from darkness to light, from condemnation to salvation. In Christ's death you have life, now and forever. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener