

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Lent 4B
March 10, 2024
John 3:14-21

Gospel Upon Gospel

And 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. . . . 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.” (John 3:14-15, 18 ESV)

Dearly Beloved in Christ:

We sinners are a rotten lot. We complain about our Lord’s gifts just like the Israelites in today’s Old Testament reading did (Num. 21:4-9). We too rebel against our Lord. We too are often ungrateful. We too despise and gripe about what our Lord gives us, or at least how it is given. We think being in His presence or studying His Word is a burden. We think it’s a bore to be here each week just to hear about our sin and to receive forgiveness. After all it’s easier to continue in our sin than to repent and turn away from it. We like the darkness because it hides our evil deeds. We don’t want anyone to know how sinful we really are. Though God certainly knows the awful truth.

Yet, He does not treat us as we deserve. He doesn’t send venomous serpents among us to inflict a painful death upon us. We suffer enough as the result of listening to that first serpent in the garden. When our first parents ate the fruit, they brought death to all of us. But God does not leave us dead in our transgressions and sins. He does not condemn us. We do that ourselves. Our sinful thoughts, words and deeds condemn us before God. We truly deserve nothing but His wrath and punishment now and forever.

And while it’s hard to hear this, it is necessary. For without the Law and its accusations and condemnations, there will be no need for the Gospel. Without the diagnosis of the disease of sin, we won’t much benefit from the medicine of the Gospel of forgiveness. Indeed, the Law leads us to the Gospel. All three of today’s readings show this.

The Israelites complained against God and His servant Moses. Though God had delivered them from bondage in Egypt, including saving them from Pharaoh’s army, though He had provided food and drink - manna, quail, even water from a rock - they complained. They accused God of trying to kill them. They detested that which God had done and given them for their welfare. In short, they were whiny kids who didn’t like what their Father gave them. So

God sent venomous serpents among them. When people were bitten, they died. And there is no stronger preaching of the Law than death, for as God says, "The wages of sin is death." (Rom. 6:23). Yet, because of all that God had already done for them, this affliction served to turn them to God for help. God's servant whom they had spoken against is now asked to pray for them that God would deliver them. What a change! And the amazing thing is, Moses did pray for them! Then, in His great mercy, God directed Moses to make a snake on a pole and set it up. If anyone was bitten by a snake, all he had to do was look at the snake on the pole and he would live. Rather than simply annihilate them, God saved them. And yet, it was not the snake on the pole that saved them, but the promise that God had attached to it. Furthermore, this whole episode pointed ahead to a greater salvation.

But before we get to that, our Epistle (Eph. 2:4-10) tells us that we were dead in transgressions. Because of our sin we were separated from God. We were His enemies. There was absolutely nothing spiritually good in us, not even a desire to seek God and certainly no desire to walk in His ways. Just as Adam and Eve hid after eating the fruit, so we too want to hide from God so He won't see what we've done. We deserve to be left to rot in our sin and in death.

But God doesn't leave us to rot. And God does not leave us in the darkness of sin and death. Rather, He acts to save us and restore us to life. He sends His Son in the flesh to save us from sin and death, not to condemn us. He sends His Son, the Light of the world, to enlighten us with His grace. Christ came to save us, to forgive us, to give us life. Christ came to live the life of obedience that we are unable to live. He came to suffer a damnable death so that we wouldn't. He was raised up on the cross just as that bronze serpent was raised up. And all who look to Him are saved from their sin. He rose from the dead to give us life, now and forever. That's the Gospel! Listen to those familiar words again, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

Yes, Jesus became flesh to save everyone - without exclusion. There is no one for whom our Lord did not suffer and die. There is no sin beyond the reach of His sacrificial death on Calvary's cross. There is no sin too big or too small, no sin too bad or too heinous that Christ's bloody death doesn't cover. Jesus died for all - all people and all sin. This is the way in which God loved the world.

Yet, not everyone will have their sins forgiven and be saved because they refuse to repent of their sin, often denying that it is sin. By this, they deny Christ and His forgiveness. For the faith which saves does not exist where intentional, willful sin reigns. The Gospel is for overcoming sin and its effects.

But that's not all there is to the Gospel. For the Gospel also includes delivering that forgiveness, that life to you - personally. Certainly that happened at your Baptism. God washed away your sins and made you His own dear child. He so connected you to Christ that His death and resurrection become your own (Rom. 6). He continues to deliver His Gospel to you as He forgives you all your sins in the Absolution spoken by His servant. In His love for you He teaches you His Word through reading, study, and preaching so that you may grow in the knowledge of His abundant grace and love for you. Our dear Lord Christ who gave His body and shed His blood on the cross gives you His very Body and Blood for the forgiveness of sins. The Gospel is all grace, all gift, and it is given to you in abundance.

The Son of Man has been lifted up on the cross that you may look to Him, believe and live. In His grace, love, and mercy, God has looked upon you with favor. "For God [loved the world in this way] that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." God "made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." (Eph. 2:5-7).

With such love shown to us by the Father and the Son, let us turn from the darkness of our sin, give up our evil deeds, and so expose them to the light of God's Word, that, living in the light of Christ, we would do what is true and walk in such a way "that it may be clearly seen that [our] deeds have been carried out in God." God grant it to you, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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

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