

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2024 (Year B)



PROCLAMATION POINTS

The following are some thoughts and questions to be used for a text study on the weekly lessons, or for jump-starting the imagination of the preacher and hearer in preparing for the proclamation event.

*"Christ alone is, and He alone remains, the Bread of Life.
This Bread gives the world eternal life and abolishes death.
If He (Christ) gives the world eternal life, it
follows that He must drive away death;
for the world is born in sin and death
and is the devil's own."*

– Martin Luther –
Sermon from November 26, 1530

Numbers 21:4–9

The Israelites were grumbling again; this time about the lack of decent food and water in the wilderness. God was upset with their disobedience and lack of contentment so he sent fiery serpents into their midst. The serpents bit the people who died from the poisonous venom. It may be challenging for us to think that God would send punishment on his people if we think of God as only loving and merciful.

- Do you think that God sends misfortune and death upon us because of our lack of faith and disobedience? Or does our disobedience bring with it consequences of its own?

As the Israelites began to experience certain death by the bite of the poisonous snakes, they begged Moses to tell God that they were sorry. God forgave them and instructed Moses to make a physical sign of healing and wholeness: a bronze serpent on a pole. In their affliction, when the Israelites looked upon the bronze serpent they were healed.

- In what ways is the serpent a symbol of our human sinfulness? (Think back to the first humans in the Garden.) Why is looking at and acknowledging our sin essential in the process of forgiveness and healing?
- In what ways does God use physical signs to show us his healing, forgiveness, and mercy?

Psalms 107:1–9

This psalm of praise takes a look back at all of the wonders of the Lord: from Israel's wandering in the desert, their hunger and thirst and homelessness, to the place where God satisfies all their needs. It is because of his steadfast love that he brought them to safety, security and redemption.

- The psalmist said, "They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them in their distress" (107:6). When has God delivered you from distress? How do you know it was him?

Ephesians 2:1–10

Paul reminded the Ephesians that in sin they were dead — children of wrath, lust, and deceit. But now they had been made alive in Christ Jesus. This was all due to God's gracious mercy and love. In the same way, we have been saved by grace through faith and not by our own doing.

- What comes to mind when you think of being "dead in sin"? Can you recall a time in your own life when that was your reality? How did that change?
- Can a living person make itself into a dead body? How? On the

other hand, can a dead body make itself a living person? How is this just like the reality of sin and faith for us?

Paul said that the Christians in Ephesus once walked following the course of the world. He equated that to being under the power of the Evil one.

- In what sense is our physical reality (earthy-stuff) subject to spiritual realities (airy-stuff)? Is this good or bad news?
- How is the "prince of the power of the air" still at work today in our post-modern world? Is this any different than it was in Paul's day?

John 3:14–21

Today's lesson comes at the end of the story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who visited Jesus under the cover of night (John 3:1–15). Citing the Old Testament lesson for today, Jesus told Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be "lifted up" just as the serpent was lifted up by Moses in the wilderness. Gazing upon the bronze serpent, the symbol of their sin, brought healing to Israel. Now our eyes are to be fixed on another image: Jesus on the cross. He brings ultimate forgiveness and healing.

- In what real sense did our sin put Jesus on the cross? How does seeing Jesus on the cross show us how serious our sin really is?
- In what way does God use the cross of Christ to bring about new life in us? How does Christ being "lifted up" by our sin actually serve to heal us of our sin?
- Why is the cross of Christ such a stumbling block for those who do not believe?

There is a play on words in this passage that leads us to the ultimate truth of Jesus' death on the cross and how it affects a new reality for sinners. The Greek word used here for "lifted up" is *hoop-SA-oh*. This word not only means to physically raise up, but in a metaphorical sense, it also means to exalt, or focus attention on. This is one of the great paradoxes of our faith: Jesus being lifted up on the torture instrument of the Roman government is the means by which God accomplished his purpose of salvation.

- When confronted by our guilt and regrets, why is it essential to keep our eyes fixed on Christ? What happens to us if we focus solely on our sin?
- When you think of how God used the cross to give life (the exact opposite), does it make you look any differently at suffering, addiction, pain, and joy in your own life? How might this help us see God's grace and mercy in the most difficult times?