

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018

Text: John 3:14-21

Theme: "This Cross is For You!"

If you are not here today please raise your hand. I see no hands going up. If you are here, raise your hand. Now I see some hands going up, but not all. Maybe some are not listening or did not hear clearly or you are like me, you don't like people telling you to do things like that. The fact is either you are here or you are not. There is really no middle ground.

It's like that with a lot of things. This flashlight is either on or off. When I turn the switch on, the connection is made, the circuit is complete and those carefree little electrons start their march going through the bulb causing a lot of excitement and light is produced. On or off, there is no in between. In our OT lesson today we had two groups of people. Those who had been bitten by snakes and those who had not. Those who had would have had fang marks, and swelling, maybe paralysis, and if not treated, death. There were two other groups, the living and dead.

Yes you are either dead or alive. All of us here are in the alive category. If we drove down to Jonesboro Memorial Gardens all of those remains in the ground would be in the dead column. Dead or alive, no middle ground.

Are you saved or condemned? There is no middle ground.

Dead is very common you know. We do certainly see it in our OT lesson from Numbers 21. There we see a tired people and a tried leader.

They had been out in the wilderness a long time, a very long time, going on 40 years. They were to blame for their extended journey in the desert. God had brought them to the promised land in relative short order. They set out from Sinai in the second month and the second year (Numbers 10:11) and made their way to the promised land. But their lack of faith that God would give them victory over the inhabitants of the land resulted in that 40 year sentence. God continued to provide in all this time—manna, manna, and more manna—month after month, year after year, six days a week. But as we see Israel grew tired of that providing. They vocalized that in a very ungracious way speaking “against God and against Moses.” (vs 5) Then it was serpent time. God sent fiery serpents, we would assume poisonous snakes. “They bit the people so that many of the people died.” (vs 6) It as not a good time in the wilderness. There must have been a lot of dead people lying around.

It was the night of the walking dead in our Gospel lesson. On the night of our text, a dead man walks into the room with Jesus. Oh, he thought that he was very much alive. That’s often the thinking of those with his affliction. Nicodemus was a teacher of the Jews. He thought he knew the answer. Keep the law according to the tradition of the fathers, throw in the a little mercy of God and you might just make it after all. We hear Jesus words from the Sermon on the Mount, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20) He heard some rather joy killing words. “Unless one is born again (or from above) he is not able to

see the kingdom of God.” (vs 3) “Unless one is born of water and Spirit he is not able to enter the kingdom of God.” (vs 5) This man was dead and going to stay that way, born that way, and had not ability to change it.

Are there any dead here this morning? It is safe to say this room is full of formerly dead people. “And you were dead in trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air.” (Ephesians 2:1-2a). Have you been saved? If you were to die tonight (or sooner) would you go to heaven? Have you invited Jesus into your heart? Have you said a prayer such as the following? *“Dear God, I want to be a part of your family. You said in Your Word that if I acknowledge that You raised Jesus from the dead, and that I accept Him as my Lord and Savior, I would be saved. So God, I now say that I believe You raised Jesus from the dead and that He is alive and well. I accept Him now as my personal Lord and Savior. I accept my salvation from sin right now.”*

Suppose you did say a prayer like that. Were you sincere? If you were sincere, were you sincere enough? Maybe you were just saying the words because others were saying them too. Perhaps stuff has happened since then and you need to say them again. So you die and God says, “Why should I let you in heaven,” and you say, “I’ve accepted Jesus,” and God replies, “What does that mean?” How comforting is all this? Sincerity in words does not guarantee results. It depends on whose words.

We certainly see results in our OT lesson, a real revival. God provided salvation from the poison. The means was a snake on a pole, a bronze snake. “Everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. 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.” (Numbers 21:8-9) You either looked or you didn’t. If you looked on that lifted up snake after you had been bitten, you lived, recovered. Don’t look and die. And if you were already dead there was no looking to be done for you were done.

Jesus points the dead man in the room back to this event. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” (John 3:14) He was lifted up on the cross. It was not a bronze image of Him. It was the real flesh and blood Him on that cross, the real living Jesus who would become the really dead Jesus. He was dead, buried. But He was revived. His body did not see corruption. He took up His life again, was raised on the third day. Because He has His words are not dead letters but His words are Spirit and they are life.

So are you saved? You can be saved from many things, but what I mean here is being saved from sin, death, and the devil. We all need saving. The wages of sin is death. There is disruption and decay in this world because of sin, the whole cosmos. Physically we are dying a slow death day after day and one day the life will just be sucked right out of us. Death is the result of sin. But there is a fate worse than physical death. It’s called hell. That would be forever and forever away from God’s gracious presence with the devil and all his angels. Hell was made for the devil and his angels, not for humans, but there will be humans, the condemned, unbelievers. Really all creation has been snake bit. This prince of the

power of the air as Paul calls him, seek to keep as many in the dark as he possibly can.

Are you saved from all this? Hear Paul's words: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even 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." Hear more of his words: "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." Hear Jesus' words: "¹⁴And 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." Hear the most familiar words: "¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, ¹ that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Hear yet more: "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."

The message is we have been saved by grace through faith. Faith is believing. But who can believe? The dead in the wilderness were not revived by taking in the view of the snake with their eyes. Dead eyes don't see. We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We could not will ourselves to believe. Let's hear some more of Paul's words, God's words through Paul, words that formed part of that basis of the "sinner's prayer" I read

earlier. “Because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9—notice there are no words here about accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, those are human additions). “For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes on Him will not be put to shame. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. For everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” (Romans 10:11-13).

But there is more to be said on this matter:

¹⁴ But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" ¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

To call on is to believe. Such faith is looking to the One lifted up. He is held up for us to see in the Gospel. Paul writes, “we preach Christ crucified.” (1 Corinthians 1:23). The Spirit at work to convict of sin in the law, to give faith through the Gospel. One of Lutheran forefathers, major one in America wrote, “*The Word of God is not rightly divided when one makes an appeal to believe or at least help towards that end, instead of preaching faith into a person’s heart by laying the Gospel promises before him.* (CFW Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, Thesis XIII*).

Receiving Jesus is a matter of believing, trusting His promises, taking Him at His Word. We are like little children, needy, begging, receiving, not demanding. We certainly are children in rebirth, this born again by water and Spirit, the Spirit poured out in baptism. The Spirit gives us the eyes and hands of faith to see Jesus and hold on to Him. Whoever believes will not perish, but have eternal life. It is “have,” not could be or maybe. Paul even uses the language “have been saved.” Faith is holding on to the One who is holding on to you.

In the shame of the cross Jesus dealt with the shame of our sin. It is a shame to reject the work of Jesus, quite a shame, even condemnation. Reject Jesus, knock Him away, try to do it on your own, and you have all the shame of sin to try to hide, but you can't do it. To remain with sin is to be dead, condemned, having an appointment with God's wrath. Christ has faced it already, why would one to face it himself?

Salvation is God's work. It is His gift to us. We have it through faith. We are His work, saved by grace through faith. We are God's workmanship, those created in Christ Jesus. We are those doing God's work, those doing good works which God prepared beforehand for us to do. It's the same thing Jesus says in our text, “But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that *His deeds have been carried out in God.*” (John 3:21)

Are you saved? It's God's gift, God's promise for you. This cross is for you. It is Christ for you, forgiveness and life for you, a life of serving

God now, and a future in the presence of God in the wonders of His
eternity. For Jesus sake. Amen