

Lent 4B
March 14, 2021
Grace Lutheran Church
Lakeland, Florida

John 3:14-21
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-1
Numbers 21:4-

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

Today we stand at about the halfway point of Lent. And what a Lent it has been, hasn't it. Some feel that this Lent has lasted a year – it was a year ago that I announced the decision of your Executive Committee and Church Council to suspend in-person worship and gatherings because of this new virus – the “novel coronavirus” as it was called. Since then we have adjusted and accommodated to an ever-changing health landscape. We have foregone family gatherings and even life-marking milestones like weddings and, more sadly, funerals. Some have learned how to bake sourdough bread. Others tackled their junk closet. Some of us simply sat and wondered, “when Lord, when?” It is fitting to take stock of what this year has held for you. What have you lost in this year? And, as importantly, what new awarenesses have you gained this year? Where have you seen God at work? Where have you been at work? Where have you grown?

Lent is a good time to explore this. As we have discussed, Lent is not a series of “mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.” Rather it is a time of introspection, a time to reorient one's life in relationship with God and one another. We see that the 40 days of Lent reflect the many other “forties” we learn of in Scripture – again, not 39+1 but rather “As long as it takes.” That long, God stays with us. We think of the 40 years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness, the forty days Jesus was tempted. The 40 days of rain with Noah and his family and the animals tucked into the ark. So, too Lent is forty days. About half is now behind us and half is ahead. If you want a second chance at your Lenten disciplines, at what you've given up or taken up – here it is! It's never too late.

As we look back at our Old Testament readings through this Lenten season, we recall God's covenant with God's people. Let's think about the term “covenant” a minute. It is not the same thing as a contract, though some have termed it so. Covenant, however, in Scripture is born of relationship of God with God's people, relationship that is born of God's steadfast love and mercy. “God's steadfast love endures forever!” So, on the first Sunday in Lent, we heard the story of God's covenantal promise to Noah that he would never again destroy the earth by a flood and the bow in the sky was a sign of that covenant. Then we heard God's covenantal promise made to Abram and Sarai barren in their old age – the promise that God would make of Abraham a great nation and Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Last week we looked at the Ten Commandments which guide us in how it is that we are to live as God's covenant people. And we particularly considered the Third Commandment to rest.

In the Old Testament reading today we hear of our ancestors in the faith in the midst of their wanderings in the wilderness as they had been freed from slavery in Egypt some years before. The wilderness – where demons tempt, life is rugged and rocky, and only God can provide food and drink to sustain human life for year after year after year.

God made a promise to his people to deliver them from bondage and bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. But here they were in the wilderness – after the deliverance but before the land of promise. An in-between time. A time of waiting. And in this in-between time, they engaged in one of the favorite pastimes of God's people – they murmured. Now, we don't often speak of “murmuring” today. Today we call it whining and we often ask one if they want some cheese to go with that whine.

The Israelites had a very short memory – they forgot God’s deliverance, they forgot how he provided them with water, they complained about that boring food that he provided day after day after day. Instead they thought they wanted to go back to Egypt where at least they leeks and cucumbers – and they even described Egypt as a land flowing with milk and honey! A short memory indeed.

Complaining is one thing but speaking out against God is another – and that’s what they did. This was sin, plain and simple. And God punished them – God brought divine judgment upon them – in the form of deadly snakes. Yet, know this: God’s judgment is always intended to draw God’s people back to God. And it did. The people came to Moses – their one-person prayer chain – and confessed their sin and asked Moses to go to God to remove the snakes from the land.

Well, in the same way that God gave Noah’s family a way **through** the floods in the safety of the ark, so God gave the wanderers a way to be healed with the snakes all around. He didn’t remove the snakes but he commanded Moses to craft a bronze serpent and mount it on a pole and lift up that pole so that whoever looked upon it may be saved – not by their act of looking, not by some magical power in the bronze serpent, but by the gracious healing hand of God manifested in the serpent on the pole.

This bronze serpent was so important to the Israelites that it was kept for hundreds of years in the holy of holies of the Tabernacle and then the Temple. But things changed – the people started worshiping the bronze serpent itself rather than God who provided the healing. And ultimately, the bronze serpent was destroyed by a God-fearing king because it had become a mere token, an idol in and of itself.

Yes, for three Sundays we have looked at God’s covenantal relationship with us – a relationship that God created and drew us in to through the wonder of God’s steadfast love and the joy of our baptismal waters. And today in our Gospel reading we see God’s covenant expressed and lived out in yet another way.

God loved the world so that he gave his only Son... This verse is so familiar to many of us. It may have been one of the first verses we memorized. We may have seen the banner in the stands of the endzone of the football game. We may have seen it on t-shirts or ball caps or bumper stickers. But please go far beyond this to ponder the mystery of this covenant enacted.

Sometimes this verse is used to divide us into those who believe – and will be saved -- and those who don’t – who will not be saved. And, aren’t we glad that we’re on the believing side of things. But hear these words from our Gospel reading again – *God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

The world of which the Gospel writer speaks is not those who call themselves Christians, it is not those who celebrate our national religion – patriotism, it is not even those nations who identify as Judeo-Christian. The word “world” is better understood as it is in the original Greek – cosmos. That is, all that is, all that exists, all that has been created. God’s covenantal promise out of God’s steadfast love for the cosmos is to redeem it.

Now, the response of the world to this abundant grace was to take God’s Son and nail him to a cross because the good news was just too difficult to bear. This week I read something to the effect of this: The Cross was not God’s invention – it was ours. In all our need for an eye for an eye, I have to wonder sometimes if God listened to us cry for blood, as we sought to fashion a justice that suits us, and that God offered his own blood in his Son, Jesus. It may be that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was not to satisfy God’s wrath, but instead to show God’s response to ours.

My friends, God did not send God’s Son into the world so that he would suffer and be hung on a cross and die. That was not God’s purpose. God sent God’s Son into the world to proclaim the good news of God’s presence with God’s people, the coming of God’s kingdom in Jesus, a life surrounded and supported and permeated with the steadfast love of God. This is grace. And our response to this, indeed

the response of the Roman Empire, the Caesar, the powers that be, was to nail the gospel proclaimer to the cross. And it continues to this day in many respects, doesn't it.

You see, the cross was not God's response to humanity's sin. It was humanity's response to God's overwhelming Love! *“God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

God so loved the world that when God looked at the devastation of the flood, he made a covenant promise sealed by a bow in the sky. When God met with Abraham, he made a covenant promise of untold numbers of descendants. When God met with Moses, God set the bounds of the covenantal relationship of God and God's people. And even in the desert, after all their moaning and groaning and murmuring, after all the snakes and wandering in the wilderness, God continued to love them.

God so loved the world that God's covenant continued in the life and teaching and ministry of Jesus who loved the poor and the oppressed, healed the sick and infirm. And in the years and the centuries that followed, God continued to love the poor, and the oppressed, sending prophets to proclaim that the kingdom of God lies in loving the least and the lost of society.

God so loved the world that out of God's perfect love came the perfect human. This loving God gave himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. And through Christ, God revealed that all of the law and the teachings of the prophets could be summed up in a simple covenant of love: Love for God and love for our neighbor.

God so loved the world, that in the waters of our baptism we were claimed and named the “Beloved,” anointed by the Holy Spirit to be Jesus' presence in the world. To carry his light and good news to those around us.

Covenant promise. Covenant relationship.

Thanks be to God. Amen.