

March 10, 2024
Fourth Sunday in Lent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

John 3:14-21 (Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10)

LOOK TO THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SINS OF THE WORLD.

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

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

These words of Jesus recorded in St John’s Gospel are likely the most famous words in the Bible. Rather than quote them, many Christians simply refer to them by chapter and verse... John 3:16. Some call these words ***“the Gospel in a nutshell.”***

What is the Gospel? In short, it’s the saving Word of God. The ***Gospel*** is the Good News of forgiveness of sins, peace, life, and joy because of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

When Jesus says ***“whoever believes”***, ***what is it to believe?*** In the original language the word translated in verse 16 in our Gospel text as ***believe*** can also be translated as ***“be convinced of, having confidence in what is spoken or written, [and] primarily a religious commitment... with God or Christ as the object of faith.”*** (cf: ANLEX 314)

The John 3:16 ***Gospel in a nutshell*** identifies four things:

- First, it identifies God the Father as the source of the ***Gospel***. God demonstrates His great love for you and all mankind by giving His only Son over to a violent death on the cross for your salvation.
- Second, it identifies the beneficiaries of the ***Gospel*** as ***“everyone who believes.”***
- Third, it identifies the means by which you become a beneficiary... which is ***responding*** to God’s love in simple ***faith*** in Jesus.
- And fourth, it identifies ***God’s response*** toward the beneficiary: all ***who believe*** will live eternally, and those who ***do not believe*** will perish.

Webster’s Dictionary defines ***faith*** as: ***“a firm belief in something for which there is no proof.”*** (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary) The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way:

“¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

Christian ***believing***... Christian ***faith*** is created and given by God – and – it has an ***object to grasp and cling to***. It’s not ***blind faith*** or ***faith in yourself*** or ***faith in whatever***. (Middendorf, Romans 1–8, Concordia Commentary, 89–90) St Paul says:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:16–17)

Hearing is passive. If you’re in a place where something is being proclaimed, you do not have to do anything to hear it. As a matter of fact, you’d have to do something like plug your ears in order not to hear it.

“Through the Word of the Gospel, faith is produced. The object of faith is the Word of the Gospel, for in the Word of the Gospel faith apprehends the forgiveness of sins gained by Christ.” (Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, 67–68.

Faith is passively receiving the gift of salvation from God. The direction of the action is all from God to mankind.

We see this in our Old Testament lesson this morning. The Israelites are grumbling against the Lord God and Moses. God has just given the Israelites victory over the Canaanites. (cf: Numbers 21:3) But during the long wilderness journey from Mount Hor, the people become impatient. (cf: Numbers 21:4-9) Their ***faith*** in God is waning and they’re ***clinging*** to their old life in bondage in Egypt. It wasn’t that they didn’t have food, they thought they deserved better food. They’d become entitled, privileged, and ungrateful. Like any parent whose patience had been worn down to the last thread, God finally had enough. In His righteous judgement – and to call the people to repentance – He sent fiery serpents among the people. Demonstrating the wages of their sin, many of those who were bitten died – which drove the survivors to repentance.

“The[y]... came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.’” (Numbers 21:7)

Our gracious and loving God never abandon’s His children. But as usual, He doesn’t always rescue us in the way think He should. Why didn’t He just remove the serpents? Why didn’t He drive the fiery serpents away? He didn’t. Instead, He provided a Savior.

“... the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and 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)

All who looked to the bronze serpent in ***faith*** were saved from the poison of the fiery serpents. But how can that be? There’s no power in a bronze serpent. A serpent means poison and death. Except ***this*** bronze serpent had the Word of God’s promise attached to it.

Do you remember back in to your confirmation days when your pastor asked, ***“How can a bronze serpent do such great things?”*** Oh... Wait a minute. It was regarding Baptism. He asked:

“How can water do such great things?”

Answer:

“Certainly not just water, but the Word of God in with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this Word of God in the water” (SC, IV, 9)

By the power of the Word and promise of God, all who were snake bit and looked to the bronze serpent in **faith** were saved. Having faith in God's promise, they lived. Those who looked elsewhere – died.

A point of clarification here. Some people will say that the Israelites cooperated in their healing because they had to physically look up to the bronze serpent. But that's not the case. Every bit of their salvation... 100% of their deliverance... was because of God's **Word of promise**. Looking to the bronze serpent didn't add anything to their deliverance. Looking was a **faithful response** to God's Word. It would've been impossible to truly **believe**... to have **faith**... and yet not look.

But people do it every day. They say they **believe** that salvation comes through Jesus. They say they have **faith** Jesus – but where do they look in **faith**? They look and **grasp hold** to the pleasures of the flesh and the treasures of the world rather than **cling** to the Word of God and all the gifts Christ won by His sacrificial death on the cross.

Where do you look and to what do you **cling** to in **faith**? Is it science... the government... your money... your own reason and strength? While you were still a sinner, God looked upon you and saw you were snake bit and stung by the poison of the old serpent – the devil. He saw you were dead in your trespasses and sins. He saw you living as a child of wrath, living in the passions of the flesh, and carrying out the desires of the body and the mind. (cf: Ephesians 2:1–3) He saw that you needed an antidote to save you from the poison of your sin. In our epistle text, St Paul writes:

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved [you],⁵ even when [you] were dead in [y]our trespasses, made [you] alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:4–5)

When Jesus humbled Himself, leaving the glory of heaven and taking on the flesh of man, He knew exactly what He was getting in to. In our Gospel text He says:

“¹⁴ 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)

Occasionally we talk about types and shadows in Scripture. Typology is when a person or event in the Old Testament pre-figures or foreshadows a person or event in the New Testament. This morning our Old Testament and New Testament lessons are perfect typology. Consider these comparisons.

- a) Moses' bronze serpent hanging on the pole had every appearance of a poisonous snake.
- A) Jesus body hanging on the tree of Calvary had every appearance of a man poisoned with sin.
- b) Contrary to its appearance, the bronze serpent had no poison and was completely harmless.
- B) Although Jesus' appearance was that of a sinful man, He was the harmless, Holy spotless Lamb of God who carried your sin and mine.
- c) Those who were snake bit looked to the bronze serpent in **faith** of God's Word and lived.
- C) All who are poisoned by every form of deadly sin and transgression can look to Jesus in **faith** of His very Word that:

“...that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

You have Jesus’ promise that:

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned...” (John 3:18)

You see, all Scripture points to Jesus and His work of salvation on your behalf. God does all the work. You and I receive by **faith**. As I said earlier, **faith** is a **gift** given you by the grace of God. The biblical definition of grace is God’s unmerited favor for the sake of Christ. It’s God’s riches given you at Christ’s expense on the cross. It’s a gift you don’t deserve but God gives it to you because of Christ’s work on your behalf. Even when we were dead in our trespasses, by God’s grace, you were made alive together with Christ by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. (cf: Titus 3:5) St Paul tells us:

“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. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:8–10)

In this place in the Divine Service, our Lord God pours out His grace upon you in Word and Sacrament. By the grace of God you are saved by **faith** alone – but **faith** is never alone. Scripture teaches that good works and deeds flow forth from Christian **faith**. The Holy Spirit enables you to delight in the Law of God and live a more God pleasing life. Yes, the sinful nature continues to sin. But your renewed and regenerate heart gives you the power to love your neighbor, honor your spouse, and treat others with honesty and integrity, performing good works and deeds that flow from the love of Him who first loved you. (cf: FC Ep III, 11; FC SD, III, 31)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, God gave His only Son to be lifted up on the cross so that whoever **believes** in Him may have eternal life. Even though Jesus died on the cross, He arose from the dead and the third day, and He lives and reigns to all eternity. He lives and reigns for you. So in your despair and your misery, **cling** to Christ crucified in **faith**. In your sickness and your illness, look to Jesus and **grasp** hold in **faith**, believing that He will never leave you nor forsake you. Whether things are going great or whether it seems the world is coming to an end, look:

“... to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of [y]our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame...” (Hebrews 12:2)

That’s a lot to remember, so put it in a nutshell:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.