

Sermon

March 11, 2018

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year B

Based on John 3:14-21

The Healing Power of Christ on the Cross

Have any of you been snake bitten before? How about a spider bite? Bee sting or wasp sting? Those hurt don't they. The sting is painful enough, but as the venom starts working its way through your body, the pain gets worse and worse. For some, the body reacts to those stings and bites so badly that if they don't get medical treatment quickly they may die. The sting is bad enough. But that poisonous venom, that's what really hurts.

Sin is sort of like getting snake bit. I believe that's what Jesus has in mind when we hear these words from John 3. Jesus compares his saving work to when Moses lifts up a bronze serpent in the desert. Sin and being snake bitten go hand in hand. You see, sin is more than just doing something bad. Sin is more like poisonous venom that lingers in you and will harm you, even kill you, if an antidote isn't applied. Sin is like snake venom coursing through your veins.

When Jesus talks about Moses lifting up that bronze serpent in the desert, he's referring to this story we find in Numbers 21:4-9:

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

We can see how Jesus takes this story from Israel's past as a symbol for what happens when Jesus is lifted up on the cross. The bronze serpent, when gazed upon with faith, brought healing. Just so, Jesus, the one who took on himself all the sin of the world when lifted up on the cross, brings healing to those who look on him with faith. They receive healing from the poison of sin. Yes, Jesus was lifted up on the cross so that no one might perish, but have everlasting life.

This is the good news of the gospel! We can be healed from the corrupting poison of sin by looking upon Jesus and believing in faith that he can heal us. There is healing for our sin-sick souls. All who look upon the crucified Jesus in faith will be healed.

Yet, so many people refuse to do this. So many people refuse to acknowledge the depth of their sickness and their need for healing. They know their lives aren't right but they don't realize how messed up they really are. They think that if they just try harder, that somehow everything will work out all right. Most of you have heard of Alcoholics Anonymous. The program has twelve steps toward recovery. The first step in the program is to acknowledge that you need help, that you don't have enough power to help yourself. Many people acknowledge that their lives are a mess. But they will not acknowledge that they need help. It is hard to admit that you are helpless, that you can't do life by yourself. We don't have all the answers. We don't have enough strength. We can't make it through life on our own. We need help. The first step toward healing, whether it be from addiction or from sin, is to admit that you need help.

What today's scripture teaches is that those who admit that they are powerless over the effects of sin, and are humble enough to stand in the glaring light of God's truth, warts and all, trusting in the healing power of Jesus, that they will receive healing from the poison of sin that is ruining their lives. This is such a crucial step, to humbly stand before Jesus, completely vulnerable, aware of how sick you are, hoping that Jesus won't reject you but will heal you. John Wesley spoke of the "almost Christian." An "almost Christian" is one who believes *that* Jesus saves us from sin. But the "almost Christian" has not become humble enough to stand before Jesus, fully aware of how much they need to be

saved, and trusts that Jesus can heal them. An “almost Christian” believes Jesus can heal. A true Christian believes that Jesus is healing them.

It is hard for us to admit how bad it is, how sick we really are. It is hard to let the light of God’s truth shine on us, in those dark places where we try to keep things hidden. We try to avoid being honest about how messed up we are by thinking to ourselves, “I’m not that bad a person.” We wouldn’t say we were as pious as Job but we are good people. But let’s look at Job for a minute. Job was so pious even God was bragging about him. But when the time of testing came, eventually, Job grew angry with God. The testing revealed in Job the sin of pride. Job could not understand why God was letting this happen to him. He didn’t deserve it. He demands of God to explain Himself. Then, God finally answers Job by blowing him away with a string of questions that reveals to Job how arrogant he was. The light of God’s truth shined brightly on Job. But instead of being defensive, Job recognized he had messed up. Job said to God, “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I had heard of you, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” In spite of how pious he was, so pious God himself was bragging on him, the glaring light of God’s truth made him realize that he was not well at all.

Dorotheos, a great spiritual teacher from many centuries ago, taught from experience that the closer we draw to God, the more evident it becomes to us of how sinful we truly are. We all live with blinders on, even those of us who have given our lives to Jesus. We have heard and believed the gospel, but have we seen God? If we did, would we not realize just how corrupt we still are? Surely, like Job, we would despise ourselves and repent in dust and ashes if we stood before the glaring light of God’s truth. We would beg to look upon the cross of Christ and be healed from the poison of sin coursing through our veins.

We have to let the light of God’s truth shine upon us. It will be painful. Like all of you, I believe in Jesus. I trust in Christ alone for my salvation. But when the searchlight of God’s truth gets flipped on, I join Adam and Eve and run for cover! Am I the only one? How hard it is to

be completely honest before God and acknowledge how sin sick we are, even as believers. In Psalm 26:2, the psalmist sings, “Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind.” How many of us would want to endure that kind of test?

For many of us, including me, we have to increase our trust in the power of Jesus to save us from our sin. We have to trust *not* in our own goodness, but rather trust in God’s mercy, who sent Jesus to be the one who can draw the poison of sin out of us. This is the good news for us: we can’t save ourselves, but God can save us. God has provided the remedy for the sin sickness that is killing us. We can look upon the cross and be healed, believing that if we look on the cross and trust in the healing power of the cross of Christ, that we will have everlasting life. The poison of sin is drawn out of us when we gaze upon the cross of Christ. That is what Jesus taught. And it is a mystery. We don’t know how it works. But it is what God has revealed to us. The cross of Christ is the means by which we are healed from sin. The more we can truly believe that with all our heart, the more we are able to let our lives stand before the bright spotlight of God’s truth and be able to say, “Do not look on my many sins, but have mercy on me, O God, in your loving compassion, and save me.”

I know it can be scary. It’s scary to acknowledge that we are hopelessly messed up. It’s scary to confront the painful truth of ourselves. It is scary to acknowledge that our lives, which may last seventy, eighty years, even longer, are but a puff of wind, a flower that blooms during the day but at night dries up and withers away. It is scary to admit that all our hopes and dreams, our successes and disappointments, our goals and plans, are but a flash in a pan. The years of pain, rejection, and abuse we are inflicted with, the wearing away of our bodies, all leads to death. It’s scary to admit that we are going to die.

Sarah Foulger offers a powerful perspective on this. She finds it interesting that God has Moses make a bronze serpent, that which the people feared most. The people didn’t want to see poisonous snakes. They were frightened of them. Those poisonous snakes were the source of so much death. But, if they could muster up enough courage to gaze upon what they feared, the poisonous snake, then they would be healed.

If they could confront their fear, and realize that the power of God can overcome what they fear, then they will be healed.

Foulger makes the connection for us. We fear rejection. Christ was rejected. We fear pain. Christ suffered. We fear being abused. Christ was abused. We fear death. Christ died. As we gaze upon Christ on the cross, we realize that our fears of abuse, pain, suffering, rejection, even death, can all be overcome because we can know that God does *not* condemn us. God does not condemn us, God loves us. God does not reject us, God forgives us and claims us as one of His children. We come to realize that God's love for us is steadfast. Nothing can separate us from God's love except our own choice. We discover that the poison of abuse, suffering, rejection, and death, has lost its sting in Christ who conquers. We need not be afraid of anything, because perfect love casts out fear. And to live without fear is to live a full and abundant life.

This is the gospel. We can stand in the glaring spotlight of God's truth, and allow our life, our thoughts, our deeds, be tried by God. And we can be assured that we will flunk that test. Yet, God loves us anyway because God knows of what we are made. God knows that we are but dust and ashes. We can be assured that God loves us, in spite of our many shortcomings. We can always look upon the cross of Christ and be healed.

I invite you to pray with me:

For God alone my soul waits in silence;
From him comes my salvation.
He alone is my rock and my salvation.
My fortress; I shall never be shaken.
On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
My mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
Trust in him at all times, O people;
Pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us.

- portions of Psalm 62