

March 11, 2018
Fourth Sunday in Lent

“Into the Light”

John 3:14-21

It might seem somewhat out of form to have John 3:16, the verse I noted last week as being “the Gospel in a nutshell,” read in the somber and penitential season of Lent. True, this section highlights the cross in foreshadowing the Son of Man being lifted up. But we always hear this verse in terms of the Gospel, “*that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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.*” Good news indeed!

Perhaps the reason the Gospel is so singularly clear here is because this verse is so comforting and so familiar that we don’t pay a whole lot of serious attention to the words of Christ that follow. The fact is, these words that follow bring the importance of our repentance into sharp focus.

“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. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 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.”

There is a boatload of Gospel for sure. But the Law here is just as stark. The call to repentance is as plain as the nose on your face...as plain as that bronze snake held high on a pole when all those snake-bit Jews were dying!

Think about it; all those Jews in the wilderness had spoken out against God and against Moses. Everybody was guilty of this offense. So the Lord sends fiery serpents among the people and folks are getting bit and dying. That’s Law. That’s crime and punishment right there. Everybody who grumbled against Yahweh deserved a snake bite.

But God, in His mercy, answers Moses’ prayer and sends deliverance in the form of a bronze snake made by Hebrew craftsmen and raised up on a pole. The rules are simple; the dying look to the bronze snake and they live—Gospel. They don’t look, they die—Law. How many do you think refused to look?

But this isn’t just about deadly venom being rendered impotent by looking at a snake statue. Jesus draws a direct correlation to salvation by His cross: “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*”

We are all infected by sin and are thus dying to God. Jesus Christ is our Savior—the One sent by the Father to be raised up on the cross for our deliverance. We’re all snake bit. Who’s not looking up?

You see, we make this a much more difficult dynamic than the Jews faced. Their alternative was starkly life and death, as in live now or drop dead now. The dilemma we face is live in wickedness and unbelief now unto condemnation or look in faith upon the now-empty cross of Christ, have all your wickedness exposed and nailed to that cross by the light of His Gospel, repent, pick up your cross, and follow Him into life. Basically it’s the same dynamic: look to the cross and live—Gospel. Don’t look and die—law.

But because the venom of our sin isn't burning in our veins and bringing us to a quick and painful death in a matter of hours or days, we think we have options. Because of our fallen nature we think there are ways to manage this sin-poison as if it isn't killing us just because it looks like we'll be sucking breath for a few more years. We grow comfortable with certain sinful practices and tuck them away in the dark corners of our life. Private lusts and hatreds, "minor" thefts and disobediences, pride, greed, unforgiveness, rampant love of self—these find a home somewhere in our life and we, maybe without really even thinking about it, fail to even try to evict them.

"For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

Impenitence is allowing our sin to remain in the dark. Repentance is taking those sins and exposing them—bringing them before the true light of the world, the Christ lifted up on the cross. *"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."*

To do what is true, we must see what is true—our sins are killing us, separating us from God for eternity. Knowing this we look to Jesus lifted up for us on the cross and we see the truth, that our sin is not hiding in the dark corners of our life; it's nailed right up there on the cross in Christ. Our life is saved! We are forgiven. We are made holy by our baptism into this death for us and we now live in the certain resurrection that follows!

Living in the Gospel of Christ, we don't make room for works of darkness. Yes, they try and hide in the dark shadows, but daily the eviction process is underway. We turn to that baptism, to the Supper, to the Word and know there is no safe haven for sin in us. By Christ and in Christ, our works, our life, is being lived to the Father's glory, just as every day of Christ's life in our human flesh. Raising our eyes and believing in Christ lifted up for us, we wear the gift purchased for us by His blood: His righteousness before the Father.

So the simple take-away today is to keep looking up. Don't get comfortable in the dark with your sins. You know better. You can't live there forever because darkness stands defeated and is coming to an end. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but the venom of sin will have its way with your soul and you're helpless to stop it.

But God's promise is simple; look up and see the mercy He has given—Christ the crucified. Whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. He is the Gospel. The only other option is death under the Law.

I don't think any of those snake bit Jews tried to figure out a better way, a way to somehow manage the venom rather than look on God's mercy lifted up in that snake. How stupid to know of the Son lifted up but to avert your eyes for anything of this fallen life. Don't be that way.

Repent. Turn from your sin and see the cross, and inherit the life of the Christ risen beyond it.

Amen.