

Sunday, March 22, 2020

4th Sunday in the Season of Lent

Dear Laurel Presbyterian Church family,

Greetings on this Lord's Day!

As the sobering idea of what might be happening around us begins to sift through spaces once fill with daily routines, it occurred to me: this is another week when we won't see each other in church. And, what a loss that is! Historically, when events shook the foundation on which we depend – such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or the assassination of an important leader, or when planes flew into buildings – people found their way to a house of worship even if they hadn't been there in a long time. But, this is different. This time, we cannot gather on Staples Mill Road. However, that doesn't mean we cannot worship together. Your Clerk of Session is exploring ways to record sermons and make them available online. Meanwhile, please think of the faces you hope to see soon, as you join me in this simple worship:

Invocation:

Holy and loving God,

We boldly claim the promise of Christ

that where two or more are gathered in Spirit, he is with us.

With Christ among us, we know the power of your love for us.

With Christ among us, we imagine your glory in the faces of our brothers and sisters, with whom we cannot worship today.

With Christ among us, we know we can do all things.

Free us now to be a people renewed by the transforming love

that came so we might have life, and have it abundantly,

through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Hymn: 624 "I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art"

(Sing loudly, and don't worry about the tune)

**I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art,
my only trust and Savior of my heart,
who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;
I pray thee from our hearts all cares to take.**

**Thou art the life, by which alone we live,
and all our substance and our strength receive;
sustain us by thy faith and by thy power,
and give us strength in every trying hour.**

**Our hope is in no other save in thee;
our faith is built upon thy promise free;
Lord give us peace, and make us calm and sure,
that in thy strength we evermore endure.**

Call to Confession:

The proof of God's amazing love is this: While we were sinners
Christ died for us. Because we have faith in him,
we dare to approach God with confidence.
In faith and penitence,
let us confess our sin before God and one another.

Prayer of Confession:

**Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word,
and deed, by what we have done, and what we have left undone. We have
not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as
ourselves. In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we
are, and direct what we shall be, so we may delight in your will and walk in
your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.**

Declaration of Forgiveness

Hear the good news!

Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has
begun. Friends, believe the gospel. **In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.**

OK, be bold. Stand up and sing:

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen, amen.**

Peace be with you. **(And also with you.)**

Prayer for Illumination

Dear God,
Startle us with the truth of your Word, so we may find
Light for our darkness...
Courage for our fears...
Hope for our despair...
Wisdom for our confusion...
And peace for our turmoil...
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor the Israelites 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.

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

John 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Just 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.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Today's Old Testament lesson brought back memories of one Advent when the Youth Group at my first church was digging through boxes for ornaments to decorate the Chrismon Tree. You know, the Christmas tree with all those those white and gold symbols that remind us of Jesus Christ: crosses, stars, angels, doves, crowns of gold, crowns of thorns, scrolls representing the Word of God, Alpha and Omega (*the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet that remind us Christ is at the beginning and end of all things*) and butterflies (*symbols for transformation, resurrection and the immortal soul*), to name just a few.

And then, someone yelled, “What is *this*?” while holding up that very strange Chrismon: a snake coiled around a cross. Lots of people avoid that one because, well, most people don’t like snakes.

During my first summer living in the Manse beside the Presbyterian Church outside West Point, I came in from a long day and was sitting on the sofa going through the mail when a strange noise came from the corner. At first, it sounded like the house might be settling; the way old houses do when the sun starts to go down and the air begins to cool after a very hot day.

Instead, it was a snake, coiled around a crinkly Ikea bag. While I was on the phone asking the head of Buildings and Grounds for help, the snake started toward the sofa – the *new* sofa that would have to be burned if it got in there. Worse yet, if the darn thing got lose in the Manse that would be the end of sleep... **FOR-EVER!**

So, I started stamping my feet and yelling, “Bad snake! Bad snake!” to keep it in the corner until Wilton and his wife Mary arrived. Wilton quickly dispatched the snake – all 5 ½ feet of it – and Mary, who is the bravest woman I ever met, helped me look under every piece of furniture and in every corner and closet to see if the serpent might have had friends or relatives.

People who heard this story later said: “You’re lucky. Now you won’t have mice.” Mice I could handle, but I did not want to share my house with a snake – even a beneficial black snake.

And, therein lies the interesting duality of human reactions to serpents: on the one hand they represent temptation and sin, such as in the second creation story in Genesis when God tells Eve there will be enmity between her children and the snake that is destined to crawl on its belly for tempting human beings to disobey the commandment not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

On the other hand, some folks think snakes *are* beneficial. A few nuts even keep them as pets. Ancient people in Egypt and Mesopotamia used the snake as a symbol for gods that brought fertility and healing. The ancient Greek god of healing was represented by a snake twined around a staff – the image still used by the American Medical Association.

Our queasiness with today’s story of Moses lifting up a bronze image of a serpent and the people being healed – even coming back to life – is more complicated than our natural, visceral, response to snakes. For one thing, God is very clear in the Ten Commandments that people must not make images of anything on, under, or above the earth. And, we must not worship images as a source of magical or divine powers – even representations of our own God. So, what was God thinking... telling Moses: “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”

Because this story seems to be in conflict with God’s previous commands, it probably wouldn’t find its way into the lectionary if Jesus had not used it as a platform for what might be the most well known verse in the New Testament:

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." is the preamble leading to: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son..." (*finish it with me...*) **"that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."**¹

But, what does Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness have to do with Jesus and his cross? Well, this morning's Old Testament lesson is about the day the children of Israel pushed God's patience too far. From the time Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt they have been carping and complaining. They didn't like manna, so God sent quail. They got tired of quail. They didn't like the water, so God told Moses to strike a stone and out came water. But, it wasn't Evian or Perrier so they still complained. They didn't think Moses would come back from his face time with God, so they made another god – a golden calf – just in case. From the beginning, the "Let's go back to Egypt Committee" has kept the people whining and fearful and doubting because they didn't think Moses knew what he was doing.

This latest incident is different. The Israelites have mocked God's provision for them and doubted God's intentions. And now God, who is not amused, has inflicted them with fiery serpents: Divine instruments of punishment AND of healing. Remarkably, and for the first time since they left Egypt, the Israelites repent: no excuses, no attempts to blame their grouching on circumstances beyond their control. They simply confess their behavior for what it is: they have sinned. They ask Moses to intercede with God on their behalf; and he does.

Now here is the amazing part that we have seen over and over since creation:

- First, the human propensity for disobedience: Adam and Eve in the Garden... Cain and Able... Noah and the flood... Abraham and Sarah... Jacob and Esau... Moses and the Israelites... it will go on and on up to this very day... including us – each of us.
- And then, regardless of how often bad behavior happens, God's way of dealing with us is always the same. Once we turn away from disobedience, we discover that God's grace and forgiveness are there. Have always been there, waiting for us. We didn't earn it; we just turned around and found it, again.

The serpent Moses lifted up was not an idol to be worshipped. It was a reminder than when human beings doubted God's ability – or willingness – to care for them. When they lost faith and mocked the source of their very lives. When they were dying of their own sin and doubt, God provided a way for them to come back.

When they looked up at the serpent on the pole and remembered God's saving act in spite of all they had done, it restored their faith – their trust. And that trust in God's providence brought them healing and life. By the way, this was the last time the Israelites grumbled... at least, in the wilderness.

¹ John 3:16, King James Version

According to Paul, we are no different from the Israelites. We are the walking dead who try to muddle through time; mired down in our own trespasses, because that's the way the world operates.

And yet, even as we suffer from the self-inflicted wounds of loving the world too much... of holding onto our individual and collective anger... envy... fear... and violence; even then there is a remedy in Jesus Christ.

Just as that bronze serpent became the symbol – the reminder – of God's healing act in the Sinai wilderness, so the Son of Man being "lifted up" will become, not just a symbol, but the costly gift that brings healing and wholeness into this wilderness that surrounds each of us.

The serpent on a pole cost God nothing. But our "salvation by grace through faith" cost nothing less than everything. It cost God's very self in Jesus Christ. "While we were yet sinners," we hear in the call to confession, "Christ died for us."

But, the "lifting up" of Jesus means more than his suffering and death on the cross; more than absorbing the worst the world could offer and refusing to repay in kind. "Lifting up" is even more than overcoming the cycle of life, and death, and then new life through the resurrection. "Lifting up" has the added meaning of exaltation: of Jesus' ascension and place at the right hand of the Father. This one who came *from* the Father has been lifted up – raised up – and has *returned* to be exalted as the Lord of heaven and earth.

As the Israelites looked to the reminder God had given them for their healing, all who look to Christ – who believe in him – will not perish, but will have eternal life. What motive could God have for giving this costly gift of salvation that is not something we could ever deserve, but is by God's grace alone? The answer is simple: "God so loved the world..."

In fact, the whole of Scripture can be read as God's love letter to the world: pointing to, and emanating from, the lifting up of Jesus Christ –for us!

I wrestled all week with this message, as the grim reality of what it means to be part of a worldwide pandemic seemed to unfold in slow motion. Even started to look for other scripture lessons, out of concern that what happened in the wilderness might cause us to ask if all that is happening today is a punishment for our disobedience. The answer is: "No, this is not God's punishment."

Throughout time, human beings have proven to be quite capable of creating our own calamities out of greed... envy... fear... arrogance... cruelty... and a host of other tribal tendencies that keep us from living – and working – together for the common good. What we can't seem to do on our own is find healing for our self-inflicted wounds.

But, just as God provided healing in the wilderness, God also provides healing right here in the wilderness of 2020, where... as Paul said... God makes us alive in Christ. Not just some benign, Sunday school verse-memorizing version of alive. But, truly alive: spiritually... emotionally... hopefully... joyfully... lovingly alive.

In John's Gospel... believe is an active verb. Believing brings trust... trust brings following... following brings stumbling out of our darkness to live in the light... and the light brings "deeds done in God."

The life Christ offers us – the rich full life of believing and trusting and following – is not out there waiting somewhere. That life is here... now... when we rest completely in him; trusting his impossible and improbable words, that:

when we honor the Father in Heaven above all else in the world – above wealth, security, popularity, even family and country;
when we hallow God’s name and refrain from grumbling;
when we work for God’s kingdom that is here now and always coming;
when we seek, and follow, God’s will above our own;
when we trust that God will provide for our daily bread and all our needs;
when we learn to forgive, even as we are forgiven;
when we admit that we – and all creation – are predisposed to temptation and sin in many forms, and sincerely ask God’s help to overcome both.
When we do – actually do – all these things that we pray about every Sunday, then we embrace the new life that God in Christ has provided for *our* wilderness journey. Amen.

Hymn: 700 “I’m Gonna Live So God Can use Me”
(Sing loudly, and don’t worry about the tune)

I’m gonna live so God can use me anywhere, Lord, any time!

(repeat)

I’m gonna work so God can use me anywhere, Lord, any time!

(repeat)

I’m gonna pray so God can use me anywhere, Lord, any time!

(repeat)

I’m gonna sing so God can use me anywhere, Lord, any time!

(repeat)

Benediction:

Live in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Blessing:

May the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ;

The love of God, the Father, and

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Be with us all, this day and forever.

Amen.