

The Fourth Sunday in Lent • March 22, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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John 3:14-21 (Num. 21:-49, Eph. 2:1-10)

"Signs"

People love signs. They must, because you can see signs pretty much everywhere you go. There are signs all over the roads that we see every day: signs that tell us when to stop and go (Traffic lights) and signs that give us direction (One Way). We read signs that tell us how to prepare for the day ahead (Weather icons). For the past many months, people have looked to a particular sign to try to understand the state of the financial markets (Dow Jones graph). Signs serve to communicate facts and concepts visually, quickly conveying important information that can be very useful to the people who are looking at them. Signs can give direction. People *need* direction, some indication of which way to go or which actions to take.

I was talking with a friend of mine this week, and he gave me permission to share this story. He has been dating a young woman for about a year or so. They had known each other back in college and just happened to get reconnected. It seems like everything just came together for them, so they started going out. There was just one catch: he's Christian, and she's not. While they have been dating, he shared his faith with her time and again, but it didn't seem to be making much of an impact. And now, with almost a year having passed, he was looking for direction. Should he pursue the relationship, as marriage could be a real possibility, or end it and move on? While we were talking about his situation, he asked if I had any thought as to what he should do. I recommended that he ask God for a sign about which path he should follow. He did. And within a week, he knew that both he and his girlfriend had come to the conclusion that their different beliefs meant that their relationship could not move forward. But even though his decision resulted in loss, he is confident that it was the right choice to make. The very next weekend, he ended up going on a retreat with a number of other Christian young adults – and the topic was prayer and following God's shepherding direction. Signs abound.

Each of our readings today lifts up a sign. In Numbers, we hear that the people of Israel have grown impatient – again – and are complaining against God and his appointed leader, Moses. So God sends venomous serpents among the nation that He brought out of Egypt and sustained throughout their long journey in the wilderness, a people who did not put their trust in Him. The serpents, we hear, bite many, who then die. Chastised by this punishment, the people plead with Moses to pray to God that He would take away this plague that has been killing them. Moses prays, and God responds. He instructs Moses to make a sign of a fiery serpent, set on a pole. Moses did just this, taking some of the bronze or copper from the region and fashioning it as God directed. From that time, whenever someone was bitten they could look upon the metal serpent and not perish – but live. **This sign didn't just convey information, it was *effective*: it cured those struck by a deadly poison.** Through this sign, God demonstrated that He would forgive His people.

In our Gospel text, Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who would become a disciple. And though it contains one of the best-known verses of all of the Scriptures, we need to pay particular attention to the couple of verses that precede John 3:16. Here, Jesus points back to that sign given to Moses and the people of Israel and links it to himself. The Son of Man, the Savior sent by God, must be lifted up so that all who believe in Him may have life – everlasting life. The Son of Man "lifted up" would be God's sign to the people, and, like the serpent in the wilderness, this would be an *effective* sign: **it would give life those who are as good as dead.**

We don't need signs to show us that we're in trouble. If our eyes are open, we don't have to go looking around for an indication that our lives have not been perfect and that the world around us is

dying. We have been bitten by the fiery serpents that we encountered while we kept our eyes closed, stumbling around in the dark. The venom of sin is in our blood. Everyone who goes without treatment is as good as dead already! Indeed, as Paul writes in Ephesians, all of us “were dead in the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” People have lived poisoned, dying in the darkness.

God sent His Son, our Savior, to be lifted up on the cross for all the world to see, that those dying in the darkness might look on him and live in the light. The reddish copper color of the serpent in the wilderness would remind the people of atonement, of the blood of the Passover lamb and the sacrifices made for the people to reconcile them with God. **You and I lived under judgment until God opened up our eyes and we looked on the sign of the cross, His sign of atonement and reconciliation – of forgiveness.** For God loved the world in this way: He gave His only-begotten Son for us, that the world might be saved through him. Jesus didn’t come to hand us over to punishment, to speed along our death from serpent bite of sin. He took all the venom of sin, all of the poison, into himself, and died for us. And as Paul also writes, “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in 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 coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” This is the everlasting life that Nicodemus hears about from Jesus: new life as forgiven people, lived in the light of God’s grace.

We still live in a world that can feel like a wilderness, even as people who are sure that we have been saved by God’s love in Christ Jesus. Uncertainty and hardship persist. This can be a hard world, between the problems that we bring down upon ourselves and the troubles that continue to develop around us. We continue to feel the impact of difficult financial times – some of us more directly than others. We struggle with challenges at work, at school, and at home. Take another look at our reading from Numbers. God gives Moses and Israel the sign of the serpent, lifted high on the pole for everyone to see – a cure for the venom of the serpents which bit the people. But He didn’t take the serpents away. People still got bitten. **God doesn’t take all the serpents away in our lives, either.** We still get bitten because we are not perfect people and this is not a perfect world. But we have the sign of the cross, and that changes everything.

When you look to the cross, you are changed. Looking to the cross of Christ – and I’m not just talking about the crosses you find hanging on a wall at home or even at a church – remembers God’s grace, the great love that He has for you as His own beloved child, one who has been purchased through the copper-colored blood that Jesus shed for the atonement of all. Under the healing sign of the cross, the poison of sin has no power over you. Looking to the cross, God gives you direction and purpose, giving new life that can thrive even in the wilderness. You are released for service to other travelers you encounter as you journey in this life – you become a member of God’s own rescue squad, empowered to go out and bring the bitten to the One who came to heal them in His love.

Signs are all around us, but there is only one that delivers life. Look to the sign of the cross, the sign of God’s grace, and live.

Amen.