



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

This morning our Old Testament lesson brings us our next Lenten promise or covenant. Whoever is bitten by a poisonous snake will die unless they look at the bronze serpent on a stick that Moses is holding in the air. What an unusual promise to make. Ah, but there is more to the story as we read our Gospel lesson from John. Jesus tells us that He will soon be lifted up on the cross like the serpent so that those who look to him in faith will live. This promise is a bit easier to understand and one that makes much more sense to us.

I am not sure that everyone knows this covenant, perhaps it is the most famous of all Bible verses, John 3:16. In fact, let's say it together. "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." No matter what version of the Bible you learned that verse in, it is still the truth. Sometimes it is called the Christian Gospel in a nutshell or the Gospel in miniature. It tells us very succinctly that God intends to save us and how He will accomplish what He sets out to do. God saved us through the life and death of Jesus Christ, God's only Son. This verse also tells us clearly what our human response should be to the Gospel, to this good news, to this promise. We receive in faith what God so graciously and freely offers us and in receiving it, we have eternal life. Martin Luther was quoted as having said that if he were the Lord God, "and these vile people were as disobedient as they now are, I would knock the world to pieces." WOW! Surely a more negative outlook on this covenant. But we will get to that a bit later. And isn't it fortunate for us that God does not condemn the world but through Christ, God saves the world.

God's attitude toward us is love and it is of course shown in the gift of Jesus. His love is for all creation, not just His people. His love is so deep for the world that the death of His only Son is the price God had to pay for redemption. The holiness and righteousness and justice of God demands a sacrifice to a wicked and overtly sinful world, where only the Holy Righteous Son of God could satisfy that debt. God needed to offer up himself to die.

It is the sin of humanity that sent Jesus to the cross, not just Pontius Pilot or the people who shouted to release Barabbas. But God's love has turned this horrible crime of ours into good. Just as Moses in our Old Testament story lifted up the bronze serpent on a pole, so that the Israelites who were suffering from poisonous snakes could look upon this symbol of death and find life, so Jesus is lifted up on the

pole of the cross. God's grace for those of us who are suffering from sin and death itself, look toward Christ crucified and resurrected, and hear the promise of forgiveness of all our sins, abundant life here on earth and salvation. And what a supreme gift it is!

However, many times we look only to verse 3:16. We look no further than that verse, in fact often times we see only the God part of the covenant, the good news. There is however a very important other piece. The word for us is "believes". This covenant is open to all, but will be delivered to those, "who believe in Him". So, let us think of that for a few minutes.

Every Tuesday morning during my real estate career we had a meeting in the office, where we shared ideas, talked about new listings or what we were seeing in the marketplace. One particular morning my broker, Rick asked me to talk about writing contingencies. I was a bit shocked because I was unprepared. However, he knew that it was one of my strong suits. I started out by saying that the real estate contract is between two parties, that actually want the same thing, the house. Either the sale or the purchase of the property. Both are serious about that outcome. However, they may want different things in getting there. For example, seller wants more money and not to have to do anything to sell. The buyer wants everything perfect for the price.

When writing a contingency, it is only right that both parties know what is expected and what the outcome will be. "If" the buyer writes that the furnace has to be fixed. That is what he wants but does not tell how or what the seller will do to satisfy the contingency. And with no "Then" there is no expected outcome. However, a better way to write a contingency to hopefully hold the contract together is to have an "if, then" clause. "If" you fix the furnace "then" I will purchase the house. "If, then" in a sentence places responsibility on both parties.

Do you hear "if then" in the Gospel in the nutshell. God gave his only Son and if you believe in Him, then you will have eternal life? We have a responsibility in this covenant. We are given the greatest gift of life eternal and all we have to do it to believe, believe in the promise of God. The result of non-belief is found in the following verses of our covenant. "Those who do not believe are condemned already."

As Lutherans, we seem not to be concerned about judgment. We joke about arriving at the pearly gates and being greeted by St. Peter. But when was the last time you thought about God judging your life? Or as our reading ends, do you hide your evil in the darkness, trying desperately not to let anyone see it. Well, our creator and sustainer God sees all folks. You can run but you cannot hide. Heard that before? Well, it is true.

As I was studying this week, I read a story told by a pastor about a pastor. Go figure!

The story is told of a new minister who was making the rounds visiting his parishioners in their homes. One family had a four-year-old daughter, and she was so impressed to have the new minister come to her house that she wanted to do everything possible to impress him. With her mother's help, she served him cookies and lemonade, she showed him her room, and then she asked, "Would you like to see Jesus?" He said, "Why, of course!" She ran to her closet, climbed up on a chair and got a little ceramic figure of Jesus and brought it for him to see. "That is beautiful," he said. "Thank you for showing it to me." "You're welcome," she replied. "Now I've got to go and put Jesus back on the shelf where he belongs."

Not only can you not hide, but you cannot hide Jesus either! We need to take the advice of Jesus here, "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." And when we keep that in mind, we will be less likely to have poisonous serpents come among us. Yes, there will always be some things we will be ashamed of doing. And we need then to believe what we have done is wrong and repent to God, believing that He will forgive us in the name of His son, Jesus. And as children of the Gospel in a nutshell, we look to the cross, to what Jesus did for us in his death and resurrection. We believe that He was really God's son and that God's covenant will not be broken, so that all "who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life." If we believe, then we will be saved and the Kingdom will be ours now and forever. **AMEN**