



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

With the reading of our Gospel lesson this morning, can't you just feel that we are getting closer to Holy Week, closer to Easter? Our amazingly wonderful weather, especially at the beginning of the week sure made it feel like spring and Easter are just around the corner. In the readings there is more than just a "Lent" feel. It is a feeling that we are getting closer to the cross.

And we as Lutherans are not unlike the earliest followers of Jesus. We don't want to be very close to the cross. Remember how the followers of Jesus scattered, except for a few women. They were nowhere to be found as Jesus carried his cross up the hill to Calvary. So how close do any of us really want to be? And folks, we have the advantage, we know what is coming. The disciples and followers of Jesus did not know.

As Lutheran Christians, we are a funny group. We love to talk about God's grace. We love those beautiful worship services on Easter that fill our hearts with beautiful music and inspiring messages. I can remember a time at St Olaf when we had some high school kids for sunrise service on Easter Sunday lead us from the cemetery across the street to the sanctuary with "Jesus Christ is Risen Today". It still ranks as one of the most powerful moments in my spiritual life. Another was singing in 6-part harmony, the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's Messiah, with 11 other folks. The glowing candles, the fragrant lilies

and great music filled the sanctuary. No wonder why church attendance increases on Easter Sunday.

But when was the last time you saw a packed sanctuary on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday or even Palm Sunday? Good Friday is probably the least attended service. WHY? Is it because we are afraid of the cross? Or we just don't want to be too close because it is dark and we are afraid of the darkness? Or don't we like to be that close to death, death on a cross?

Well, think with me about our readings for today. Our Old Testament lesson from Numbers is directly referenced in our Gospel reading from John. This does not always happen even though most Biblical scholars would like us to understand that the New Testament is the fulfilling of the Old Testament prophecy. You cannot have the story of Jesus without both Old and New Testaments. Yes, the Old Testament often seems more difficult as it needs to be read through the filter of culture, history, literary construct of time. Yet, you should not read it simply as the prologue of a more important work of the New Testament. The Old Testament is a body of work that is important and has it's own message that comes through history, prophecy and wisdom. It tells of God's Promises to God's people.

And so it is with our two lessons this morning from Numbers and John. The story in Numbers is about the Israelites in the wilderness. They are truly people wandering in a dark place and they get impatient. They want to see this promised land Moses has told them about. But it is taking too long and they begin to grumble. Although God delivered them out of slavery and certain death at the hands of the Egyptians, they feel no better off in the wilderness. God provides food and water that certainly was better than what they had as slaves, but they want the milk and honey they were promised.

Rather sounds like a child being impatient with parents on a long road trip. Are we almost there? I have to go to the bathroom? I am thirsty? Remember those car trips with your kids? Dad would threaten to pull the car over to the side of the road if the kids did not stop grumbling.

And it was no different for God, the Father, maybe a bit more extreme. He sent poisonous serpents or snakes among the people. They bit the people and many Israelites died. Now realize that snakes were a part of everyday life in that time and place. A dry arid climate was a perfect place for snakes to

slither on by. But lets not go there. I know we all have a snake story or two in our repertoire.

Now our Gospel lesson begins, “And 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.” This metaphor really jumps off the page and grabs you. But wait a minute, is John comparing Jesus to a serpent, a snake? A bit odd wouldn't you say.

But we need to continue reading to see what is going on here and where this metaphor is going. We have the Israelites wandering in the wilderness and darkness. And John makes the connection to the people around Jesus, to the Jews of His day. They too are wandering in their own wilderness and darkness. Wilderness might be its own metaphor as it is not just a physical location but also a spiritual one. People were in the dark as to who Jesus really was and certainly what would happen to Him. Moses raises up a snake on a pole and by looking at it, those bitten will be saved. God is about to reveal Jesus on a cross and those that look to Him will be saved as well.

So truly as our scripture says, verse 19, “the light has come into the world” and verse 21, “But those who do what is true come into the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” Yes, Jesus has come into the world. He is the light that guides us out of our wilderness and darkness and shows us the light of salvation.

Several years ago during a Lenten service at the Congregational church, I remember Dr. Kurt Brown, giving us an idea of what it was like physically to die on a cross. He was a bit vivid in his explanation of how the body reacts to being hung on the cross by nails through the hands and feet. It was very difficult to listen too. So it is no wonder that we don't want to be too close to the cross. And not only is it a horrible death, but it must have been awful for the followers of Jesus to watch him die that way. It was degrading, horrifying, ugly and painful. And it defied all logic that the Son of God, our Savior would die on a cross. In Galatians 3:13 Paul says that, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” And he goes on to say that Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us. And so there we have our connection to the Old Testament. You see that the serpents or snakes were sent as a curse to the Israelites in the wilderness. And Jesus became our curse, but one

for our benefit. And that is how John compares the two snakes, two curses on a pole. Moses with the serpent on a pole and Jesus on the cross.

And the metaphor continues that once the people looked to the pole of serpents Moses made, they were healed. So too do we have to but look upon Jesus as our Savior on the cross. Still, how close do we want to get to the cross? I know that my children were not always happy, to say the least, to go to Good Friday services with Rodney and I at St Olaf. And they were pretty typical. Many folks cannot stand the thought of Jesus dying on the cross and just skip that part of Holy Week. But folks, we cannot have Easter without having Good Friday. We would not have the joy of Easter along with all its pageantry, if Jesus had not died on the cross and been buried. So we need to go through the cross to fully understand what John is telling us in Chapter 3, verse 16.

“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.”

God loves you so much that he gave his only Son so that you who believe may not die but have life in heaven with Him one day. And that folks is why we need to get close to the cross. We have to understand that what is up on the cross is our curse, our sin, our evil. Jesus died for it all. And when we got baptized we were marked with the sign of the cross so we and our sin die on that cross with Jesus. We are marked with the cross of Christ for all eternity and we will have all of eternity to be with our God.

So all the beauty of Easter Day to come is meaningless unless we go through the cross. That is why we have a Lenten season, to take time to reflect on what happened on the cross of Christ. Look at the cross and know that because of it, we are saved.

Let us pray: May the love of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, who is the light in our wilderness of darkness. **AMEN**