

Sermon Lent 4 2018

March 11, 2018

John 3:14-21

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, especially these words, **“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.”**

I was listening to a podcast recently that was talking about our culture and the issues we’re facing as the church. If I remember correctly, the topic was specifically gay marriage and the backlash Christians are facing for not supporting gay marriage. But as the conversation unfolded, one aspect that came out was how the foundation for morality has changed. Basically since the time of Constantine, there has been the objective foundation for morality in the ethic grounded in the Judeo-Christianity. That is to say that for much of Western Civilization, right and wrong have been grounded in the objective standard of the Ten Commandments. However, now the objection has arisen of “why is your truth more important than mine?” I’m sure you’ve heard that before: “well that might be fine for you, but it’s not for me.”

Have you ever heard that and thought, “How did we get here?” To give a brief answer—and this is going to over simplify things a bit—but it started just after the Renaissance and Reformation period. At that time there were people who started raising all sorts of arguments about God and His existence. In fact, these skeptics, as they were called, went so far that they even questioned how we can know anything, including our own existence. To answer them the statement was made “I think therefore I am.” How can I know I am here? I think. Well the author of this answer, was trying to deal with the problem sincerely, and from this also worked to argue for the knowable existence of God. But, from there came other philosophies which eventually said that we can figure everything out just by thinking about it. We don’t need Scripture, we can figure it out with our reason. And they did figure a lot out with reason. Science made a lot of great advances. But in the midst of it, the focus was taken off of that which is outside of me, the truth that is outside of me, to that which I can figure out.

But even still how did we get to where we are now? After all, even some of the founding fathers of our country who held to these sorts of beliefs, for example Thomas Jefferson who was the sort of rationalist that cut the miracles out of his Bible, even

those like him still saw truth as absolute and saw morality as consistent with the Ten Commandments. So what happened? Well, at a point it became clear that this wasn't working. It became clear that we couldn't actually be so sure of what we could think of. We couldn't be so sure of our brains. And there was a reaction. We reacted by thinking of everything via our emotions. If we had an emotional reaction to something, it didn't matter if it was rational, it was true. So, what happens now? Now we're grounded firmly in our emotions. How do I know what's right? By feeling it.

Now hopefully I didn't bore you with all of that because it's really important. It's important because it affects not only our culture, but it's affected the Church too. You see you started witnessing this reaction in the early 1800's. As the rationalists started destroying, or attempted to destroy, the ability to be Christian and rational, and as many over-rationalized the Church to the point that they gave sermons on how to grow potatoes rather than about Jesus, some started to react by making the faith about emotion. Did you want to know that you were really Christian? You could see it in passion. Did the Spirit come to you? You would know because you might roll around like a dog—where the name Holy Rollers came from. And that grew. Preachers worked out just how to manipulate an emotional response to get you to “feel” the Holy Spirit moving you toward conversion. How did you know that you were converted? You could feel it.

And this is something Billy Graham was good at. His tent meetings were geared toward driving the person to that experience of conversion. To be fair Billy Graham was not as emotionalistic as some who had come before and who came after, but it was there. The focus was on the experience of conversion, rather than the promise of baptism, or the gifts given in the Lord's Supper.

And as I say that we see that in the Church today too. Not necessarily the conversion experience with the Altar Call, per se, but there's a lot of focus on emotion. Now, if you want to know what good worship is, you have to feel it. In fact, many churches know an extreme pressure to continually update their “experience” to make sure that your emotions get charged enough week in and week out. Why? Because when the emotions get charged just right, then you “know” God must be there.

And at the center of all of this is what? Both in the Church and in society, where does this put the center of the focus? On you. It puts you at the center so that you get to become the center of experience. If something touches you in a certain way, then you can know it must be good. If you feel something is right, then it must be. If you

feel that God speaks to you, how can anyone tell you differently? Or back into the conversation about the world, if you feel gay people should get married, they should. Do you see it? In this, then, everyone gets to become the one who determines what is right for him or herself. Let me phrase that another way. Everyone gets to know what is good for him and what is evil. When I phrase it like that, does it sound familiar? **But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”** In this everyone gets to be like God.

Now as I say that I mentioned the serpent, the serpent who drew Adam and Eve into sin. As we heard today’s readings we heard about serpents again—of course, totally different serpents, but serpents. You see the Israelites in the desert, and like they always do they’re groaning about Moses. They’re groaning about the same old bread. They’re groaning because they’re not feeling good enough about what’s happening, about the experience God is giving them. And so God sends snakes in judgment of them. The snakes come and inflict their fangs upon them. So, with the venom coursing through their veins, death is immanent. But God gives them a way out. What is it? Is the problem solved by looking inside and saying, “If I can create the right experience for myself, if I can just sing the right songs and feel the right feelings, this will all go away?” No the solution was outside of them. It wasn’t in their brains, it wasn’t in their feelings. It was to look at the object outside themselves, to look at that bronze serpent.

Hopefully you see the picture. The venom is sin. The venom is sin which is now coursing through your veins. You can’t solve it, there’s not an antidote you can create. Death is immanent for you. You can’t avoid it, you can’t feel your way out of it. You can’t think you’re way out of it. As Paul said, **“you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you 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.”** You were dead in your trespasses and sins. But there is an antidote. Jesus. God so loved the world the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life.

I mentioned Billy Graham a bit ago, and wasn’t glowing about him. To his credit, I read an article about him which made the point that he not only had great character as

an individual, but kept at the center of the message that verse. John 3:16. He pointed to Jesus.

And that's the point John was making. There is Jesus. Lifted up on the cross. There outside of you, outside of your brain, outside of your emotions, outside of your capabilities, outside of you and utterly and objectively true: Jesus on the cross for your sin. **“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.”** As the writer to the Hebrews said, **“let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.”**

Do you want to know what is true? Look at Jesus. Where your sin is paid for? Look at Jesus. Where your faith is perfected? Look at Jesus. There on the cross your sin is done. There on the cross is the body broken so that yours will be raised in His resurrection perfected and free from ailment. There on the cross is the blood poured out, the life shed for you, so that you may receive life as you drink from His cup. Look at Jesus lifted up. Look at Jesus lifted up for you. In fact as we continue the service Jesus will be lifted up before your very eyes. Look at that Jesus for you. Taste His goodness. Taste it know that now you have the antidote to the venom coursing through your veins. Yes it comes to you in the same old bread and wine, given in the same old liturgy, given in the same boring way, from the same boring guy week in and week out. But look outside of yourself, look outside of your wants and tastes and preferences. Look at what Jesus is doing for you, what He is giving you. Don't look at what's inside of you, but what's outside.

You may have heard me mention this, but in the garden Adam and Eve didn't realize they were naked until they fell. I think it was because they were looking outside of themselves. They were looking at God, looking at each other, so outwardly focused in their love, that they didn't see. As we in our day are so self-centered, having to be the diviners of truth, seeking what's real in our own experiences, we see here something helpful. We can't do it right. We can't feel our way out, work our way out, think our way out. No, we're sinners for whom Jesus came, not to condemn us, we did that already to ourselves. No, He came to save us. Outside of us. Revealed outside of us in Scripture. Something firm we can stand on. Something firm we can confess to the world. Objective truth in a world that has need for something far firmer than our own opinions, thoughts, and feelings. Amen.