

Lent 4B 2021 St. Luke's Anchorage

Numbers 21: 4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, Ephesians 2: 1-10, John 3: 14-21

I speak to you today in the name of God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen

What an interesting cluster of scriptures we heard this morning.

First the passage from Numbers. The theology of this episode is unclear to me, but the message, "God saves," is very clear.

Then, in the Epistle, Paul explains that God has saved us from our sins purely by God's grace.

Today's Gospel riffs off the serpent on a pole imagery of the passage from Numbers, and applies it to Jesus. Jesus is the one, says John, who brings healing and salvation to God's people. Jesus saves.

Today's Gospel lesson arguably contains one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible: John 3: 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."

Here in the south it is rare to achieve adulthood without having this verse quoted to you for the benefit of your salvation.

I didn't grow up here, as I'm sure you can tell, but even in faraway New Zealand I experienced the pressure of people trying to save my soul, and quoting that verse at me. For several years in the 1970's I was influenced by people who were duty bound to talk to everyone they met about their relationship with Jesus Christ, or they felt laden with guilt for not having done so. There was pressure to share the Gospel with everyone you met, whether it was your best friend, or just someone you sat next to on the bus. Because some of those people were my best friends, I felt that pressure too, even though I was an

Anglican and we did not view “salvation” in quite the same way as the more evangelical denominations. But I did want others to have the same kind of relationship with Christ that I had and that was where the tension lay for me.

The coercion to evangelize is examined in a short story by Annie Dillard, entitled “On a Hill Far Away,”\* with intentional echoes of another hill, far away, on which the savior of the world died. The author depicts a woman with a kind of relational blindness, who feels compelled to witness to others before she can relate to them in any meaningful way.

In this story the author is walking on a farm in Virginia. She meets a young boy on a hillside, and after a very halting start, she has a conversation with him. But she can tell that something is holding the young boy back from conversing freely with her.

Finally, the boy blurts out what is troubling him as he says in a rush ‘Do you know the Lord as your personal savior?’ It is at this point that the author puts two and two together, realizing she had met the mother of this little boy, about a year earlier when she had stopped at the farmhouse to ask if she could walk on the farmland. In Annie Dillard’s own words:

“The woman was very nervous...My explanation confused her, but she gave permission. ... (However) She did not let me go; she was worried about something else. She worked her hands. I waited on the other side of the screen door until she came out with it:

‘Do you know the Lord as your personal savior?’

Now this is a story that speaks to us of the way that we struggle to relate to each other. Both the boy and his mother are lonely but they are both constrained from relating to others until they have given their Christian witness, even though this seems counterproductive. The woman can’t get to know Annie

until she has done her evangelizing. But most people would not take the time to get to know her, after such an introduction!

There are, of course, other ways of sharing the good news of God's love. I believe the best way of sharing our Christian witness is done within a relationship and motivated by love. A good name for this is "warm evangelism" the kind of sharing which arises out of a relationship, not "cold evangelism" which jumps on a person out of nowhere. Warm evangelism takes place with those we know, through friendship, kinship, a working relationship, a connection of some sort. Warm evangelism is invitation and welcome, not a script with enumerated steps.

I do not have a "plan of salvation" written down in the back of my appointment book, in case I should need to refer to it when I am talking to the person next to me in the line at the grocery store. That was a suggested method of evangelism given to me by a friend back in the 70's.

If someone should come up to me in the grocery store and ask me "How can I be saved?" first of all I would be very surprised, but then I would take them out for coffee, and sit and talk, to get to know them better. You see, I believe that there is no one plan of salvation that fits every person, because each person is an individual and is individually beloved of God. I would be personally offended by someone who had obviously memorized a six point plan to save my soul, and I suspect many of you would too. God has a plan to save each one of us, and that plan is individual, based on love, and is ongoing.

So, when anyone asks me if I have been saved, I always say that I believe I am being saved.

So, if you have ever been subjected to the pressure of witnessing to everyone you meet and still sometimes feel a little guilty that you do not, today I'm offering you freedom from all of that!

Now that sounds great, doesn't it? No pressure. No guilt. No need to talk to anyone about your faith, ever, if you don't want to.

But there might be some of you, Episcopalians, listening to this sermon, who are saying to yourselves, "None of this applies to me. Episcopalians do not 'witness' our faith to others in that way."

And to you I say, I have good news and bad news!

I have already said that you do not have to give your testimony to everyone you meet. That's the good news. But there is a catch!

**No Christian is exempt from the Gospel imperative.** That is, we must all "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation". (Mark 16:13)

Those were the words of Jesus, and that imperative applies to all of us. So we can't argue our way out of it. But, the catch is that you are **always** witnessing to everyone you meet, even without saying a word!

When you honk at someone who did not drive away from the green light fast enough, you are witnessing to others that you are an impatient person.

When you leave a tiny tip for the restaurant delivery person who has brought food to your door, because he took longer than you think he should have, even though he's not the one who cooks the food, you are witnessing to that person that you are mean-spirited and stingy.

I could probably give you dozens of examples, but my intention is not to be judgmental. Suffice it to say that as Christians we live our whole lives in public. People see what we do, and hear what we say, and judge us accordingly.

So how do we deal with the fact that it is our duty as Christians to remind the world that “... 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”?

How do we do this with any spiritual integrity, when we are uncomfortable asking people if ‘Jesus Christ is their personal savior’? Well, It is really very straightforward and simple.

The way that we witness to others is by living our lives in a way that is pleasing to God, so that when others see us, they see Jesus working through us. There is no need for any complex theology to muddy the waters and obscure our vision. We give witness to the presence of God by following the two commandments of Jesus - Love God and love your neighbor. That’s all there is to it. No six step plan of salvation required. No training in selling the Gospel as if the Good News was a set of pots or a vacuum cleaner. Love God with all your heart and with all your souls and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself, and everything else will fall into place after that.

And may the Light of the World who is Jesus Christ, shine into your life and illuminate God’s saving love, so that others may see it and come to love God too. Amen

\* “On A Hill Far Away” by Annie Dillard, published in Teaching a Stone To Talk: Expeditions and Encounters, Harper & Rowe, 1982.