

Sermon John 3 14 21 4th Sunday in Lent series B

Sermon: 4th Sunday in Lent

Text: John 3:14-21

Theme: By faith alone

Goal: Nothing but faith in God's promises can give us life.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: The story of the bronze snake in the desert is one of my favorites in the Old Testament to understand what faith means. And the fact that Jesus referred to this story when He was talking to Nicodemus shows the importance of that episode among other Bible Stories. And what is more: The fact that Jesus mentioned it just before the heart of the Gospel, John 3:16: “Because God so loved the world...” gives a special relevance to this story as part of God's eternal plan to save everyone by faith in Christ alone.

I – Nicodemus

Nicodemus was a faithful member of the established church, but he had his doubts. His education according to the Old Testament Laws and according to the tradition of the Pharisees led him to live a respectful life. But he knew that something was missing. Therefore he came to talk with Jesus, because he recognized that there was something very special in that man of Nazareth. He thought that doing some good deeds would please God and would give him the right to be a member of God's Kingdom. But Jesus showed him that God's way to enter His Kingdom is a different way from the one that Nicodemus was used to.

This is the thought of many of people. *'If I'm not a murderer, if I don't steal, if I live faithfully to my wife/husband... I'm a good guy and God is happy with me.'* Their relationship with God is a matter of “do it” or “don't do it”. But they ignore that God requires more from us for a

good relationship. God requires our whole heart and our whole life, a life of complete trust in Him and in His promises, - and not just some minutes and some deeds.

II – The Wilderness

When we realize that we are indeed in a wilderness full of snakes, we realize too that we cannot help ourselves. Do you know that we are like the Israelite in the desert? We are wandering in this world and we hope to reach the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God. But it is a dangerous wandering. From the very beginning of humankind's history, snakes are on the way. A snake came to tempt Eve. And we can say that “she was bitten” by the snake and the poison brought death to her and to the entire humankind. We are condemned to die. And while we are wandering, lots of other snakes are on the way: all sorts of temptations. And people are dying in their sins around us. The poison is a strong one and there is no human medicine to help. Nothing that we can do will help. There is no safe place to take refuge, there is no place without snakes in this world. We are in a desert, in the wilderness of this world, like the Israelite in the time of Moses.

Nicodemus knew that story and this helped him to understand that the way of life he was living was not enough to free him from the poison of sin and to give him security in God's Kingdom. Something more was necessary. God had to intervene to save and to help the desperate people. They knew God, but they had complained against Him and were walking far from Him, in the darkness. In the peak of their desperation, they repented and came back to God and to Moses, asking for forgiveness and for help. And God helped them, in a very unusual and simple way.

III – God's love

God says through the prophet Ezekiel 33:11: “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the

wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?" And Jesus Himself said to Nicodemus: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. God showed His patience and His love to the people once again. He commanded Moses to make a bronze snake and to put it on a pole. And He promised: "Anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." (Num 21:8). There was nothing special in that bronze snake, but the promise of God! *The only way the Israelite who had been bitten by the venomous snakes could escape dying was to look at the bronze snake Moses had lifted up on a pole.* (ABC 1258). And so it happened. Even though many had already died, the people survived and continued their journey to the Promised Land.

It was a matter of faith in God's promise. If someone said: *'What can that bronze snake help me!!! I want a balm or ointment to put on my wound...'* or if he tried to do something by himself to be free from the poison of the snakes, he would die. Only faith in God's promise to look at the bronze snake would help and give life.

What do we learn from this? As we are walking in a wilderness full of snakes, and we have the poison of sin running in our blood, the only solution is to wait in God and believe in His promise. And His promise is: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Jesus, lifted up on the cross for our sins is God's solution to give us life. Looking at Him with faith, having repented of our sins, we have life, eternal life! St. Paul wrote in the Epistle for today (Eph 2:10): "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast."

IV – Light and darkness

Such a great love is despised by many, who prefer dwelling in the darkness among dangerous snakes to walking in the light of God.

“Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.” And people are still complaining against God instead of accepting His way and instead of believing in His promise. They are condemned. God doesn't need to condemn them. “Whoever does not believe *stands* condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son... but whoever believes in Him is not condemned...” Jesus came to save those in darkness. Looking to Him on the cross and believing that He paid for our sins and is alive for us gives us forgiveness and freedom from eternal death.

Now, we can walk in the light of God. “Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.” Paul wrote: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The good deeds of Nicodemus and our good deeds receive now God's approval, because they are done as fruit of the faith, in the light of God, - not far from God.

Conclusion: This was the big struggle that Martin Luther fought at his time. Faith comes before; after this come deeds. We cannot please God by our deeds before we trust in Him above all things. We cannot work our own salvation by ourselves. We are condemned and God needs to save us. And the way He offers is the way of faith in His Son, who was lifted up on the cross for our sins and was raised from the dead for our justification (Romans 4:25).

The bronze snake on a pole in the desert: A vivid image of how much God loves us and provides for our salvation: His Son Jesus on a cross. “Everyone who believes in Him has eternal life!” Amen.

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