

Prescription on a Pole

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 11, 2018

Have you ever seen an old building in such poor repair that it looks like it is just about to fall down? It could be an old barn, or an old shed or maybe even an old house! To leave that old, dilapidated building just standing there, when it is in such critical condition could be AN ACCIDENT THAT IS JUST WAITING TO HAPPEN!

- Children playing near that old building could walk into it, never realizing the great danger they are in! They're unaware that that old building could come crashing down around them--and rob them of their very lives.
- Fortunately, however, there are government authorities entrusted with the big responsibility of going to places like that and to label these old dilapidated buildings as "CONDEMNED."

FIRST QUESTION: Do you believe that the labeling of that building as "CONDEMNED" is a good thing or a bad thing? I believe most of us would say that the labeling of that building as "CONDEMNED" would be a good thing and hopefully, it would only be a short time later before that old building would be torn down!

While the Gospel lesson this morning contains primarily good news, there is some bad news mixed in along with the good news--that makes the good news come across to us as much better news--that it would be--if that bad news wasn't there!

If you were to ask me to sum up the words of our Gospel lesson this morning for you in just a few short sentences, I could take a stab at it; another man named Paul who has already done this for us—and in doing so—did a much better job at this assignment than I could ever do!

Romans 8:1-4: "There is therefore NOW NO CONDEMNATION for those who are in Christ Jesus. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son into the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit!"

In other words, my friends, our old, sinful human nature – has been condemned for us—in both an "AWFUL" way and an "AWEFUL" way. First through the bloody crucifixion of our Savior on the cross, but also in an awe-full way spelled, "a-w-e-f-u-l" because Jesus was willing to suffer and die there to glorify God—revealing to us the greatest revelation of God's love for sinful humanity as never seen before!

Our Gospel lesson this morning is a follow up to the words of our Gospel lesson last Sunday where Nicodemus had come to Jesus by night with some awfully big questions concerning Jesus' true identity! "*Teacher, we know that you must be a teacher sent to us from God for no one could do the might works that you do, unless God is with him!*" In response to Nicodemus' words of praise for Jesus, our LORD cuts straight to the chase: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God!*"

Please note: As often happens throughout John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking about spiritual realities but the person in dialogue with Jesus is thinking only in terms of physical realities! "*Say what?*" Nicodemus responds to Jesus: "*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter for a*

second time into his mother's womb and be born?" How can a man—be born again—when he is old? Then Jesus answers Nicodemus question in a multifaceted way.

(1) **FIRST THROUGH HOLY BAPTISM AND THE POWERFUL MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT:** *"Truly, truly, I say to you unless ONE is born again of water and the Spirit they cannot enter the kingdom of God! For that which is born of the flesh is flesh; born of the spirit is spirit!"*

(2) **SECONDLY THROUGH OUR HIS OWN SACRIFICIAL DEATH FOR YOU, ME AND ALL PEOPLE ON THE CROSS!** *"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" (John 3:14)!* Obviously, our Lord is referring to the story in our Old Testament lesson this morning (Numbers 21:4-9).

In this story, the children of Israel had been delivered from their slavery in Egypt! They have entered into a Covenant God had made with them through Moses on Mount Sinai. God gave the Ten Commandments to them to serve as the proper guidelines for their behavior now that they were living as a "freed" people in this fallen world!

So here the children of Israel are now—slogging wearily through the heat, the dust, and the dangers of the Arabian desert, on their way toward the land that God has promised them. **God IS ACCOMPANYING THEM ON THAT JOURNEY:** Pillar of cloud by day, pillar of fire by night. Ark of the Covenant.

Furthermore, God graciously rains down bread from heaven to feed them in the morning every day and drops fresh poultry—quail—out of the sky to them each evening before sundown!

Nevertheless—despite all of that care being given to them by the LORD God—the Israelites are not very happy campers! They begin murmuring and grumbling day after day, against the LORD God and Moses: *"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we loathe this worthless food" (Num. 21:5)!*

Surely the ingratitude of these Israelites is very much like our own ingratitude, at times, in the face of so many gifts that our gracious God does pour out upon us to because of his mercy—day by day!

On Ash Wednesday, we heard Prophet Joel tell us, *"Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love!"* but one important reason that the Prophet Joel was so anxious to share this message with the people of Judah, initially back then, and that we need to hear God's ongoing call to repentance today—is because the Prophet Joel was also very much aware of the fact that God's gracious and merciful disposition can reach its limit! We have all heard about that **PROVERBIAL PIECE OF STRAW THAT BROKE THE CAMEL'S BACK!!!** Camels are strong animals, with strong backs—theoretically strong enough to carry a huge amount of straw, but there can always come that moment when you place just one more piece of straw on that camel's back and the camel's back with break.

The same thing can be said for us in our human relationship. Healthy relationships are not necessarily "dependent" nor "independent" but "interdependent" relationships.

"I'll do anything to make this relationship work..." Not always healthy to say... For when one of those two persons is on a path of self-destruction—doing anything—means you are willing to allow that other person to take you down that path of self-destruction with them!

And so in our Old Testament lesson today—God sends fiery serpents among the Israelites to bite them and cause them death.

Friends, I for one am grateful that our God is gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love—and that he does not cause thunder to rumble and shoot down lightning bolts upon us—every time that we do sin; every time we do step out of line and transgress his commandments. Far from it! For as Ezekiel reminds us: *"Our God has no delight in the death of a sinner! God's chief desire always is that we should turn from our sinful ways and live" (Ezekiel 33:11)!*

Nevertheless, at long last God provides, what he believes will be a necessary corrective to his people's poor behavior! But in the horror of it all, even Moses begins to pray for these

people, who had been the brute of so much of their injustice and constant complaining! As a result, God in his mercy forgives his people and instructs Moses in the way of healing: *“Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, he shall live”* (v. 8)! Yes, God judges our sinful ways and sometimes we pay the penalty for them.

BUT GOD’S MERCY AND LOVE FOR US ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST AND GOD HIMSELF ALSO FURNISHES THE MEANS OF OUR FORGIVENESS AND HEALING. MIND YOU, HOWEVER, THE ISRAELITES MUST BE SAVED BY GODS’ GRACE THROUGH FAITH—BY TURNING AND LOOKING AT THAT BRONZE SERPENT UPON A POLE! But the way of healing and life comes from God and not from sinful people!

Many of us can remember that when we were children when we went to the doctor’s office and the doctor would write out a prescription for us, he and he alone would take his prescription pad—out of the desk—and write down the prescription himself in his own script...and sign it; with handwriting that was most often far from legible!

In more recent decades...we see the doctor making his prescription on an I-PAD or some other digital device closely resembling an I-PAD. But here—God writes his prescription on a pole! A prescription on a pole!?!

What a strange choice of remedy! God’s chosen remedy is a strange one, not just in theory, but in detail. For in looking up, they are looking away from themselves, and away from the earth to God! In looking upon a serpent, made of bronze, they are vividly REMINDED of their own sins against God that brought upon them, this horrible situation in the first place.

But in looking up in faith, they will receive healing and know something very personal and powerful about the love and the grace of God once more. There are several important points about that Old Testament lesson this morning that are certainly worthy of our consideration:

When the people cry out to the Lord God for help, he **DOES NOT HELP BY REMOVING THE SERPENTS COMPLETELY**, for that would have suggested that the root of their problem were the serpents themselves. That was not the root of their problem. The root of their problem was their own ingratitude and unfaithfulness. But in looking in faith to God’s prescription on a pole, they have to exercise the faith and the trust in God that they were lacking once more.

God’s prescription for the people of Israel—will become—strangely enough, a prescription on a pole! And Jesus says that the only way you and I can be born again into the kingdom of God, the only way that we can receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life—is by looking in faith—upon our Savior who was first lifted up upon the cross in crucifixion for our sins, but lifted up three days later from the dead by his glorious resurrection for our justification (Romans 4:25)!

It’s for your taking any my taking or for your leaving and my leaving: **GOD IS NOT A STALKER. DOESN’T DEMAND THAT WE LOVE HIM. DOESN’T SAY:** “You must love me and if you choose not to love me—then I’ll never let you go!”

No just as God has loved us voluntarily, and Jesus has loved the Father and us voluntarily reminding us, “No one takes my life from me, I lay it down freely of my own accord, I have the power to lay it down and take it up again” (John 10:18)!

But here’s the Good News that Jesus continues to share with Nicodemus in the words of our Gospel lesson: *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned; but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the Son of God”* (John 3:17-18)!

We’ve all heard that old saying: “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink!” You can lead some people to the foot of the cross but you can make them receive God’s

salvation! Jesus says that he came into our world to save the world, but some people don't want to be saved. He said that they love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil. They don't want to come to the light lest their evil deeds be exposed.

Again, we prefer not to think about people like that--but we must admit that they exist. There are, in this world, people who prefer darkness to light--who prefer evil to good. If you don't believe that, talk to a police officer. If you can find an experienced police officer who feels free to talk, he or she can tell you and me some stories that will curl your hair and maybe even make your hair stand on its end: Stories about people who have a streak of evil a mile-wide running through them.

But you don't have to talk to a police officer. All you have to do is to pick up a newspaper. The stories are there--all you have to do is to read them--ugly stories about evil people—people, who love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. And Jesus tells us that these people are condemned. They are condemned because they will not come to the light!

One of my favorite songs from the 1970s is one made popular by Tony Orlando and Dawn entitled: "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree."

It's the true story of a man who spent ten years in prison because he was convicted of a crime. But at long last his sentence was completed and he was being set free. He was still very much in love with his wife, with whom he had corresponded over the years, but he couldn't be sure if she'd be willing to take him back as her husband again or not!

"I'm comin' home, I've done my time.
Now I've got to know what is and isn't mine.
If you received my letter tellin' you I'd soon be free.
Then you'll know just what to do if you still want me!
Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree.
It's been ten long years, do you still want me?
If I don't see a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree,
I'll stay on the bus, forget about us, and put the blame on me.
If I don't see a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree."

You know the conclusion to the song: when the bus turns the corner and the man's house comes into full view...there is not simply one yellow ribbon tied around the old oak tree, but 100 yellow ribbons round the old oak tree.

We use all kinds of signs today, don't we, to signal to another person who has angered us in some way, or hurt our feelings that we are no longer holding on to the resentment, or dwelling on the pain of the past experience. Maybe you will send a card, or get the courage to make a phone call. Maybe you will flash a smile in the other person's direction, or reach out and offer a hug or warm embrace. It's always risky in doing so, because your offer for reconciliation and pardon may be spurned and rejected, and that would only add to the immense hurt and pain you have already had to endure.

But the greatest sign ever of forgiving and redeeming love, is not a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree, or a card, or a phone call, or the offer of a hug. The greatest sign of an undying

love is the CROSS. And more valuable, but every bit as visible of God's love for you and me, despite our own trespasses and rebellion, than a yellow ribbon, is his very body and his blood, once broken into death on a cross for us, and once shed to bring his love to bear upon our lives...he comes to us today with his body and blood, in with and under the earthly forms of bread and wine.

“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” (v. 14)! AMEN