

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2021

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FOURTH SUNDAY in LENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 107)*

One: "O give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is good;"

All: "for God's steadfast love endures forever."

One: "Let us thank the Lord for such steadfast love, for God's wonderful works to humankind."

All: "And let us tell of the Lord's deeds with songs of joy."

***OPENING HYMN** "Lift High the Cross" GtG 826

One: Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim

All: till all the world adore his sacred name.

One: Come, Christians,

All: follow where our Savior trod,

One: the Lamb victorious,

All: Christ, the Son of God.

One: All newborn servants of the Crucified

bear on their brow the seal of Christ who died.

**All: O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree,
your death has brought us life eternally.**

One: So shall our song of triumph ever be:

All: praise to the Crucified for victory.

One: Lift high the cross,

All: the love of Christ proclaim

One: till all the world

All: adore his sacred name.

Used by permission through CCLI License #11178434 / #2457662.

***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Merciful God,
we confess the folly of our sin and the hypocrisy of our complaints.
We grumble about the evils in our world,
even as we commit injustices and profit through deceit.
We fret about the scarcity of resources
while hoarding earth's goods and cheating the poor.
We protest the problems of our world,
but we do not actively work to address them.
Merciful God, expose our sins before the light of your grace.
Heal our sin and free us from our foolish ways
that we may know the joy of eternal life in Jesus Christ,
in whose name we pray. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world
to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.
In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

All: **Thanks be to God.**

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21

NUMBERS 21:4-9 (Common English Bible)

⁴ They marched from Mount Hor on the Reed Sea road around the land of Edom. The people became impatient on the road. ⁵ The people spoke against God and Moses: "Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us in the desert, where there is no food or water. And we detest this miserable bread!" ⁶ So the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people and they bit the people. Many of the Israelites died.

⁷ The people went to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we spoke against the Lord and you. Pray to the Lord to send the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ *The Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten can look at it and live.”* ⁹ *Moses made a bronze snake and placed it on a pole. If a snake bit someone, that person could look at the bronze snake and live.*

JOHN 3:14-21 (Common English Bible)

¹⁴ *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humankind be lifted up* ¹⁵ *so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.* ¹⁶ *God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.* ¹⁷ *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.* ¹⁸ *Whoever believes in him is not judged; whoever does not believe in him is already judged, because they do not believe in the name of God’s only Son.*

¹⁹ *“This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil.* ²⁰ *All who do wicked things hate the light and do not come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light.* ²¹ *Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God.”*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Snake on a Stick” by Pastor Bill Vincent

In 2006, a movie came out that was something of a surprise hit...with some people: “Snakes on a Plane.” The story is that poisonous snakes have been let loose on a plane by a nefarious individual.

Imagine the scene: the enclosed space of the plane, over the ocean; all these people...and these snakes! Creepy, crawly snakes. “Is that something slithering down by my feet?”

We (many) have an aversion, an inherent dislike of snakes.

Well, enough about snakes...or maybe not.

In our story in Numbers, snakes overrun the people’s wilderness camp.

We can understand the people’s pleas to Moses. Not only are the people dying. But...they’re snakes, for goodness sake!

But notice: the people request for the snakes to be taken away...and they are not.

Instead, God instructs Moses to create a snake on a stick, and the people are forced to look at the snake in order to live.

That’s the part of the story that struck me:

the very thing the people dislike,

the very thing they fear;

the very thing that is making them ill, so that they die,

is the very thing they have to look at to know healing and to live.

In some ways, we have probably heard this message before.

Sigmund Freud is probably the most famous and well-known voice to tell us that denying things about the self leads to a whole lot of trouble. We have to face up to our fear in order to overcome its crippling effect.

In our own way, we have heard the same message over this past year...regarding a deadly virus: ignoring the virus doesn't make it go away; saying it's a hoax doesn't make it less deadly.

But I believe there is more to our story than that.

In our story, the snakes serve as punishment for the people's rebellion, sin: "*We have sinned, for we spoke against the Lord and Moses.*"

To look at the snake on a stick is to be reminded – in no uncertain terms – squarely of the consequences of the people's rebellion, to face squarely their sin.

And that may be precisely the point.

As I've pointed out numerous times before, every Sunday we have this Prayer of Confession. It's not 'fun' to confess sin: the wrong that we've done.

But it is necessary.

And woe to us when we don't: our heads swell and get big; we have this skewed picture of ourselves.

Interesting, don't you think.

The snake – the very thing that is killing the people – becomes the very thing that offers life.

The snake – what some might remember as the instrument of deception in the Garden of Eden – becomes the instrument of truth:

- the truth about ourselves.
- the truth about God.
- the truth about our relationship with God.
- the truth about our relationship with others.

"Woman in Gold" is a movie (2015) that tells the story of Maria Altmann, a Jewish refugee (in Los Angeles) who wrestles with the Austrian government to reclaim iconic art work stolen by the Nazis just prior to World War Two. She is fighting for restitution.

Watching the story play out, one of the key dynamics is the difficulty some have facing the truth about what happened: Jews who had their dignity and opportunity, their livelihood and their lives stolen from them.

It mirrors our struggle in this country with racism.

Do we see what has been stolen from so many of a different color skin? Their dignity and opportunity, their livelihood and their lives stolen.

Unless we face the truth about ourselves, we will never know healing.

But that's when I realized there is more to this than simply facing the truth.
It's not simply enough to face the truth all by itself.
For the truth, all by itself, can be deadly in its own way, leading to out and out despair about self and life.

There is an additional step needed.
A step pointed to by Dennis Olson when he speaks of the "deeper source of the people's sin."

The deeper source of their sin, [he writes,] their unwillingness to trust God to deliver them.... (Interpretation, p.136 - emphasis added)

It takes more than simply 'looking at' the snake. It takes more than simply 'facing the truth'. But seeing – and trusting – the deeper truth.

Eugene March remarks,
Moses did not challenge the people to "believe" in some doctrine about God. The aim of Moses was for the people to move forward trusting that God would keep the divine commitment to lead the people to a new land.
(Feasting, Theological Perspective, p.100a - emphasis added)
...and to a new life.

And as someone noted,
When people do not trust God, it can be as deadly as a poisonous snakebite.
(Lectionary Homiletics, February/March 2012, p.53a)

We have to trust the God behind the snake to bring healing...and life.
For we cannot do it ourselves...not on our own.

Which may be precisely the point John is trying to make.
Remember as John tells the story, Jesus is conversing with the Pharisee, Nicodemus.
And remember what had been said before? Jesus talked about being "born again" (or 'born from above' as the Greek word can also be understood). And Nicodemus wondered how he could enter his mother's womb a second time. And Jesus, in essence says, you cannot. You can't do it. You have to be born "from above." You have to be born – given life – by the Spirit: by something, or someone, outside of you, beyond you. You cannot do it. You have to trust that God will.

Which just happens to be precisely what today's Epistle lesson is all about. From Ephesians 2:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.
(Ephesians 2:8-9 NRSV - emphasis added)

We need God. We have to have God in order to have life – even minimal life, let alone life abundant.

So, we look to the snake – which reminds us all too readily of the reason why we are dying and feeling the burning pain of life: it was our rebellion, our sin against God, our rejection of God, our turning from God and God’s ways.

And God makes us look that rebellion in the face...and know that God loves us still.

And therein we know healing. Then we can make restitution. Then we can build true community...and life.

We look to the cross – it makes us squirm, if we’re honest. The cross is not pretty and polished; it is ugly and vicious. It makes us squirm: we don’t want to hear the gory details; we don’t want to see the agony and pain.

But God makes us look at the cross, and see the consequence of our rebellion, our violence, our rejection, our turning from God.

Look our sin in the face...and see behind the cross – and *on* the cross – the God who loves us still: the God who loves us more than all our rebellion; the God who loves us more than all our rejection; the God who loves us more than all our hatred and violence and turning away from God.

And therein we know life.

And we can build life and offer life, because our life emerges from the life and love and grace of God.

We have to face the darkness – even in its bleakest moments – to see the light.

We have to face our sin to know forgiveness.

We have to face the death of our ways to know the life of God’s way.

And we can face the truth...when we trust the God of love who stands behind that truth. Then, together with the one who holds us and loves us, we can work to craft a new truth: of peace and embrace, of justice and compassion, of love and mercy.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

We trust in God,

whom Jesus called Abba, Father.

In sovereign love God created the world good

and makes everyone equally in God's image,

male and female, of every race and people,

to live as one community.

But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.

Ignoring God's commandments,

we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,

accept lies as truth,

exploit neighbor and nature,

and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.

We deserve God's condemnation.

**Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.**

(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Merciful God...
People: ...hear our prayer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Contemporary)*

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**For your power to save and the grace to want to, we give you thanks,
O God. Accept the gift of our hearts and the offering of our lives, that your
will may be done and your love be abundantly shared. In Christ's name we
pray. Amen.**

SENDING

*CLOSING HYMN “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” GtG 221

One: O sacred head,
All: now wounded,
One: with grief and shame weighed down;
All: now scornfully surrounded
with thorns,
One: thine only crown;
O sacred head, what glory,
All: what bliss till now was thine!
One: Yet, though despised and gory,
All: I joy to call thee mine.

One: What thou, my Lord, hast suffered
was all for sinners' gain:
All: mine, mine was the transgression,
One: but thine the deadly pain.
All: Lo, here I fall, my Savior!
One: 'Tis I deserve thy place;
All: look on me with thy favor,
and grant to me thy grace.

One: What language shall I borrow
to thank thee, dearest friend,
All: for this thy dying sorrow,
thy pity without end?
One: O make me thine forever;
All: and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
out-live my love to thee.

(Public Domain)

*CHARGE AND BLESSING

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

The Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon are reprinted by permission of Westminster John Knox Press from *Feasting on the Word® Worship Companion*. Copyright 2014.