

## **Fourth Sunday in Lent March 10 2024**

**Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21**

“Look at me.”

How many of us as parents have used that line with our children.

Especially when they have done something wrong. How many of us have heard that as children, as we stared at our feet, the ceiling, anywhere but at our mom or dad who we have so deeply disappointed by our actions.

Looking anywhere but them, looking anywhere but at what we have done.

The crying sibling. The broken t.v.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. That is certainly the case in those moments, where looking at something is so deeply difficult. Because to look into the disappointed eyes of a parent, to see the destruction or harm that we have wrought, makes it real. Opens us to see the harm we have caused someone we love, the damage we have done to another created in the image of God, the reality that this is not fun or no big deal.

“Look at me.” This is what Jesus seems to be saying in our gospel reading from John. Look at me- on the cross. God also tells the Israelites to look. Look at the result of their turning aside from God’s provision for them. Look at the very thing that torments them and you will live.

These are both difficult texts. The Israelites in Numbers complain about having no food or water in the wilderness. Then in the next breath they complain about the food God has provided for them. Enough manna in the morning to make sweet tasting bread for the day and enough quail at night to feed their family. “We detest this miserable food.” So there is food, just

not what they want? And there is water, in chapter 20 Moses strikes a rock and brings forth water to quench their thirst. The consequence of (once again) their complaint about God, their refusal of the provision God has given them- enough for them and their families each day? It is death by poisonous snake.

When they confess they were wrong and seek reconciliation, God is willing, if they look at what they did, look upon the consequences because they refused to accept God's provision. To be saved from the consequences of their actions, they had to look upon the result of their actions. To see the hurt in God's eyes. The hurt that their (collective) actions have caused not just for them, but their neighbors.

What saves them is the power of seeing the truth of what they have done. Seeing in it their own sin, their own rupture of the relationship they have with God. A breaking of the covenant that we read last week. One that called on them to be faithful to God. To trust in God's provision for them- which God has done! In short, to turn from that covenant means death.

So, too it is with looking at Jesus on the cross. John seems to say that in this way Jesus saves, not through his being crucified in and of itself, but as we look at that act and see in it our own sin. See our own fear, desire to control, rejection of God, hatred, that have put Jesus up on that cross. And in seeing on that cross not God's condemnation, for Jesus comes not to condemn the world but to save it, but rather seeing on the cross, God's love.

Bishop Michael Rinehart puts it this way, "John sees the Christ being lifted up as gospel, healing and salvation. God acts mercifully in the midst of a

chaotic world. A violent world kills its maker. This is *Lord of the Flies*. So, gaze upon it and understand. That in the face of our murder, hatred, fear, God responds with mercy and forgiveness. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." "Turn the other cheek." "Go the extra mile." "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The death and resurrection of Christ are healing signs for the world." They are a sign of God's love, not judgment or punishment.

But the journey to that point means having the eyes to see and ears to hear. The eyes to see the truth of both ourselves and of God. That even though we have been transferred from bondage to darkness and into the realm of Jesus, we continue to struggle with the reality of sin in our lives. We too look with disdain on the provision God has given us: our gifts and talents, our resources in money, shelter, stuff, our relationships that feed us, our very life. We too seek to control the God who created all that exists. To diminish God's work through God's Son Jesus by adding something else to it. You must believe this about IVF or immigration. You must wear that kind of clothing. You must decorate your worship spaces in this way.

The journey to that point is not only looking at Jesus, but the author of John also says in our text, that it means looking at ourselves. For those who practice evil detest the light because that means exposing, showing to everyone (including themselves) their sin, the evil that they do. But those who practice good come to the light- that they might see and confess their sins. That their deeds, which are done in and through Christ might shine through.

“Look at me” Jesus says to us. Yes, even this awful figure on the cross. It is hard to see the effect of our sin, our hate, our fear. What it does to others made real in Jesus. Embodied in him.

But also, look at yourselves, and see not only the truth of one who is still struggling with the reality of sin in the world and their lives. But also, the truth of the one who even though we were dead in sin have been made alive together with Christ. Not because of anything we have done, but because of the grace of God. The love of God for us that is embodied, made flesh in Jesus. “Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.”

“Look at me” our parents would say. Did you ever get up the courage to actually do it? I would wager that what you saw there amidst the hurt and disappointment was also- love. And that even with the difficult words that might come, there would also be, “I love you, we’ll figure this out.”

This is what God in Jesus says to us, then surrounds us in the waters of baptism, claiming and naming us beloved child. Freed from bondage to sin and death through that same death of Jesus on the cross and the resurrection to come.

A gift given to us not because of anything we have done or are, but because God loves us, God’s own creation.

Jesus says earlier in John, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.” To see the truth of a thing, we need to look at Jesus on the cross. I wonder if this is what Martin Luther understood when he said a theologian of the cross called a thing what it is. Spoke truth, even when it was difficult. Because he understood it is only in

looking our sin and its consequences square in the eye can there ever be salvation- recognition, repentance, reconciliation. It is only looking at our sin and its consequences square in the eye, knowing that it is sin- and knowing that we are loved still- that we can ever truly hope to change.

“Look at me.” The first commandment might phrase it, “Look only at me” God says when you look on me alone, you will live. For in me alone will you find love unconditional, grace unbounded, welcome unlimited. For in looking at the reality of sin in the world that Christ bears in his flesh, in seeing the truth of what the human way leads to, only then do we truly see the truth of our situation.

And only then do we fully place ourselves in God’s hands.

Hands that, like our parents, lovingly bathe us in the waters of baptism. Wrap us up warm in the life of Christ. Give us a meal of Bread and Wine, Christ’s own body and blood. And then send us back out into the world bathed, fed, forgiven, to tell others of the wonders of God’s love. To invite them to look upon Jesus and live.