

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 14 2021

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

I admit that I cannot recall an exact time where this happened, but I know the moment too well to not have experienced it firsthand. Standing before mom, head down, looking everywhere but her. Knowing in my heart what she is going to say. Knowing exactly what I did wrong. Literally not wanting to face it. Because if I face it, it becomes real. “Look at me, please.”, she says.

No, don't want to. If I look at you, I know I'll see how much I hurt you. I know I'll come face to face with what I did. Don't want that. Hurts me too much. Disappoints me too much. Don't want the guilt of that and of seeing you hurt.

But, I've been carrying guilt with me anyway, haven't I. Clenched in the depths of me, hidden away. The knowledge that I've done something wrong. Something to hurt you. To disappoint you. Ripped at the fabric of our relationship. That it is wrong not to own up to this.

“Look at me, please.”, she says. And I do. And all the pain and sorrow and guilt flows out. Tears and a sob from my gut, “I'm sorry, I won't do it again”. Then her arms wrapping around me. Reassurance. “We'll make this right. I forgive you. I love you.”

It's hard to face up to where we have done wrong. Especially when we know it, deep down inside. We'll look everywhere else. Hide in ways big and small to avoid seeing the consequence of our actions. Of acknowledging what we have done. As the joke goes, "Denial ain't just a river in Egypt." Yet, it is only in facing up to our actions, seeing clearly their consequences, that we can truly be saved. That the boil of guilt can be lanced and all that would eat us up can flow out. That healing can truly begin.

We see this played out in our reading from Numbers. The Israelites grumble against God, refuse to accept his provision of manna and quail for them in the wilderness. Complain about the daily bread God is providing them. They yearn for enslavement in Egypt. The consequence of this rejection is the plague of serpents. When they come to Moses for relief, when they repent, how is it God saves them? They had to look at a statue of a serpent, the sign of their refusal to accept God's provision and its consequence, to be saved. As theologian Mark Davis writes, "There is a coarse frankness in looking at one's sin in order to be saved from it."

So, too, with Jesus. John ties the lifting of Jesus on the cross with how God acted to save the Israelites in the wilderness. In his understanding, Jesus saves, not through his death on the cross in and of itself, but as

we look at him on the cross and see in it the consequence of our own sin. Our own action. Our own rejection of God. Our own penchant for violence in putting down those things we don't want to hear. Our own revolution against, or worse indifference to, the God who feeds us daily bread. Our own strange desire for the fruits of our own enslavement; Trying to be in control. How we treat others as if they exist only for our benefit. The words we whisper that put another down. The snide remarks. The superiority that comes from dividing ourselves into the worthy and unworthy. Even among followers of Jesus.

We look everywhere but there. To the cross. We deflect. Shuffle. Hide. Rationalize. We don't want to see the results of our actions. That when we do these things, we do violence to God. We don't want to see the hurt in God's eyes as we crucify Him.

But we hear God's call. "Look at me, please." Look at my love for you. Look at the consequence of your sin, your actions, and the fact that I will take that pain on myself. Look, see clearly, repent, and be healed. So that you might live.

For only in looking at Jesus on the cross, at the visible sign that God has, still and always loves us. Only in the conviction of that moment are we restored to right relationship with God. For we see clearly in Jesus on the cross the result of our sin, the way we are living. Death,

destruction, pain, the rending of relationship. We see the hurt that God feels and is willing to embrace so that we might live. And in this seeing God calls forth repentance and brings reconciliation. In that moment we are filled with grace and mercy. And hear God's words, "I have made this right. I forgive you. I love you." And we are reborn, into a life fuller and more abundant than before. Because we can see clearly. Because we no longer hold close those sins we don't want to acknowledge but are freed from them by God's grace and mercy.

This is who our God is, John says. God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world. Jesus is not here to pick winners and losers. To separate this people who deserve it, from those people who don't. To say, you're worthy. You aren't. Jesus came so that the world, the whole cosmos, all of God's creation, might be saved through him. Might be rescued from death and be healed.

Those who believe in Jesus. Who look upon the cross and see with clarity their own sin, are not separated out, are not condemned. But those who do not believe are separated, not by Jesus (that's not what he came to do) but by their own actions.

For when the Light that is Jesus came into the world people chose the darkness over the light because of the painfulness of their actions. They looked everywhere but into God's eyes and at the one lifted on

the cross. Because they cannot/ do not want to see the consequence of their sin. They separate themselves. Overcome by their sinfulness. Ignoring God's loving call, "Look at me, please."

Perhaps, part of the problem is because in our view we cannot see how Jesus on the cross saves. That is failure and death. Not victory. Even if an act of love it is weakness. It is foolishness. So, we continue with how we are living our lives. We don't want to be foolish!

John believes that all who do these worthless/evil things turn to darkness, look away, because the light of Jesus exposes and convicts them of their deeds. A conviction they cannot stand. A transformation they desperately need but do not want.

What lies in your life that you cannot bear to look at? What regret holds you back? What sin is there that you feel even God cannot forgive?

Know this. Even while you were dead in sin. Even now, sinful person that you are. God loves you, enough to send Jesus so you might be made alive. God wants nothing more than for you to be healed, forgiven, to live fully in the light of Jesus, God's Son.

This process of healing will not always be fun. There will be tears, the pain of acknowledging our sins, where we have done wrong. Of seeing clearly the hurt we have caused ourselves and others.

But to feel the love of God wrap around you. To hear God in Jesus say to you, "I forgive you. I love you." This is what changes lives.

This is what Martin Luther called the Gospel in a nutshell. That even when we were dead in sin God loved us so much God gave what was most precious, God's Son, so that through him we might be saved. We might be healed. We might be made whole.

This is the one in whose arms we rest. This is the hope we live in. And that we live out with others. For as we have been forgiven, we are called to forgive. As we have been loved, we are called to love others. As we have been healed, we are called to heal. These are the works God has prepared for us. To be our way of life.

Let us feast on this meal of forgiveness, grace, and mercy; reminder and visible sign of the love our God has for us, so that we might go and share that Good News with all the world.