

## Lent 4 / March 14, 2021

### John 3:17

***“And 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.”***

Do you like snakes? I know some people do. In fact, some people have them for pets. But many people feel uncomfortable around snakes, especially the venomous kind. I was in a cemetery in rattlesnake county. I saw something that looked like a leather belt, lying on a flat headstone. Curious I went to look and immediately realized it wasn't a leather belt. It was a snake warming itself. It was a big snake, but I don't know if it was a rattlesnake. I didn't stick around to investigate and by the time I mustered the courage to return for a second look, it was gone. I was sort of relieved until my companion looked around and commented warily, “I kind of wish I knew where it went.” A man I knew was hunting and accidentally stepped on a snake, a rattlesnake no less, complete with its rattler. The snake wasn't impressed, neither was he as you can imagine. It was a good thing he wasn't wearing rubber boots.

Snakes are beautiful creatures. They come in one shape, but in many different colours and sizes. Nevertheless, through no fault of their own, there is something about snakes that gives people the creeps. Maybe it's the way they slither about it. Most snakes are harmless to humans, but there is something foreboding about even the most innocuous garter snakes. But to be honest, I would prefer a snake to a spider any day, but that's beside the point. Snakes or serpents, have a prominent though negative place in scripture. It was the devil in the form of a serpent who led Adam and Eve to sin. In Revelation the devil is referred to as both a dragon and an ancient serpent and called “*the deceiver of the whole world*.” In promising healing from the effects of sin, which the serpent brought into the world, the Lord told Eve that one of her offspring would crush the head of the serpent, while suffering grievous injury Himself. Venomous serpents brought injury and death to the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness, but the Lord provided healing through a bronze serpent raised on a pole.

In our gospel, Jesus identifies Himself with the bronze serpent, which Moses raised on the pole saying, “*so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life*.” What God did in providing physical healing to Israel through a bronze snake raised on a pole, He would do for all people spiritually, through Jesus raised on a cross. The bite of the serpents in the wilderness, brought sickness and physical death to Israel. The bite of the serpent in Genesis, brought sin and death into the world and to human beings. In the letter to the Romans Paul wrote, “*Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*.” Jesus came into the world to undo the effects of sin, by bearing its guilt on His cross. Even as all who looked at the bronze serpent were healed of the effects of the serpent's venom, so all who look to Jesus in faith, receive forgiveness of sin. Everyone who believes in Jesus, receives the healing of their spirit in relationship with God and will have life with Him in eternity!

There is nothing greater, more marvellous, or more amazing than life. Our bodies are designed to avoid death at all costs. In a crisis, blood will stop circulating to our extremities, so that vital organs can be sustained. If the crisis deepens, blood supply will be restricted to the most vital organs. There is a force of life in us and in all living things that resists death to the very end. Even the Coronavirus fights to live. In order to ward off the effects of vaccines and herd immunity, it mutates into variants. There are living creatures at the deepest depths of the oceans, where the water pressure would crush our bones to powder; where there is no light and the only warmth comes from deep sea vents. Life is awesome! Humans can bring death. We can fiddle around with life, but only God can make things live. God gives us life through the force of His creation. God sustains our lives and the life of all things living through the functioning of His creation.

He created our bodies to live, but because of the effects of sin, death eventually comes to us and to all living things. People ask why there is suffering and death in the world, if God is good and He created all things good in the beginning? If God is good why does He allow such things? A lot of it has to do with us. In fact, going back to the Genesis, it all has to with us, our attitudes and our actions. Sin came into the world through human beings who wanted to be gods and disobeyed God; through their sin, death came into the world. Sin entered into them and through them, sin was passed to all their offspring. The effects of sin that are so sad and shocking, generally come as a result of human behaviour. We still want to be gods, disobey God and try to act like god.

It's not God who causes fights and quarrels among nations and families. It's not God who spreads the Coronavirus, or any other virus and disease which causes people to get sick and die. God doesn't travel the earth sowing the seeds of dissension, causing warfare, poverty and starvation. We like to say the devil does those things, but the fault lies with us human beings. We do those things and more. All those things are the effects of sin in the world, sin in the human heart. Jesus came into the world to undo the effects of sin, so that we would have life in Him in time and have it fully in His presence, in eternity. Jesus undoes the effects of human sin through the sacrifice of His cross. Jesus brings healing from the effects of sin to the human heart, through faith in Him.

In our text Jesus said, "*God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.*" God didn't send His Son into the world to condemn the world. He didn't need to, because the world is already under the sentence of sin and the condemnation of death. Jesus didn't come to put people in prison. He came to set people free from the imprisonment of sin and to lift the condemnation of death from our heads. The saddest thing about the human condition is that while we are aware of the problem of sin, we are powerless to do anything about it. We do everything we can to stave off death. We have more effective medicines and better treatments than in all of human history. We speculate and research the possibility of cloning new bodies, manipulating our DNA to destroy bad cells and renew good cells, but death comes anyway. Even in the age of medical science the longest life out of billions of people, hardly ever reaches the one-hundred-and-twenty-year limit God set in Genesis. When it comes to changing human behaviour, our actions and attitudes, I think we are having more success with death.

Only God can change the human heart and only God can defeat death. God defeated death, by raising His Son on the cross to take away the sin of the world. St. John wrote in his first letter, "*He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world.*" God changes the human heart, by healing us in our relationship with Him through the forgiveness of the cross, which we receive through faith in Jesus as Saviour. Whoever believes in Jesus is not condemned. Believers in Jesus continue to live in a world in bondage to sin, but they are no longer bound to sin. Believers continue to live in a world under the condemnation of death, but they have been set free from the condemnation of eternal death. Believers struggle with the effects of sin in the world and in our own lives, but in Jesus we have both forgiveness and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to walk in newness of life.

The lives of believers will end in death, even as Jesus' life ended in death on the cross. But death will not have the final say in the lives of believers, even as it did not have the final say in Jesus' life. On the third day He rose triumphant over death and the grave. Jesus defeated death through the sacrifice of His cross. He promises all who believe in Him, a share in His resurrection to a new and eternal life when He returns. We have eternal life now in our spirits through faith in Him. We will have eternal life fully, in body and in spirit, when He calls us from death to share in His resurrection!

Jesus' words in our gospel tell us everything we need to know about ourselves, about our sin, about our need for a Saviour and what God has done for our salvation; raising Jesus on the cross for our sins. Jesus' words express the essence of the gospel: "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*" These words speak of God's deep love for us and for every human soul. These words tell us that Jesus is our Saviour from sin and death. These words call us to faith, by assuring us that all who believe in Him have life with God in time and will have life with Him fully in eternity. May the Holy Spirit bless our faith. Keep it strong and bring it to fulfilment in the day of Jesus Christ. In His Name. Amen