

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
First Sunday in Lent, February 17, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 178, 153:1, 245, 297, 25:1-4.

Lessons: Numbers 21:1-9, Revelation 21:1-7, John 3:1-13.

Sermon Text: John 3:14-18.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Our gospel lesson introduces us to a man named Nicodemus, who *“came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.’”* (John 3:2)

He is mentioned in three places in Scripture. This is the first. The second is when *“Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of [the Sanhedrin’s] own number, asked, ‘Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?’ They replied, ‘Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.’”* (John 7:50-52) The third is after Jesus’ death on the cross when he, together with Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus and wrapped Jesus’ body in strips of linen with spices and placed it in Joseph’s own new tomb.

After we meet Nicodemus in our Gospel lesson, Jesus then explains that a man must be born again of water and of the Holy Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God. That leads to Jesus comparing the historic brass or bronze serpent – called in the old Sunday school books “The Brazen Serpent” on the pole in the wilderness to himself, and makes it clear how God sends salvation to mankind. Jesus himself, the sinless Son of God and Son of man in one person must be lifted up – on the cross. Today we are reminded again that

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD ...

- 1. Jesus must be lifted up – on the cross – just as the brass serpent was lifted up.**
- 2. Through this act, God offers eternal salvation to the world – to all mankind.**
- 3. Even though the crown of that creation had gone bad and ruined it all, God loved the world he created and had a plan to redeem mankind.**

Jesus draws a parallel between the act of Moses lifting up the brass snake in the desert, which you heard in our Old Testament lesson, and his own saving work for the world. The snake was lifted up on a pole. Jesus was to be lifted up on a cross. Everyone who looked in faith at the snake was healed from the bite of deadly snakes. Everyone who would look in faith at Jesus would be saved from the bite of Satan and of eternal death and receive eternal life. This is the life that begins with the new birth by the Spirit. The promise belongs to *“everyone”* who believes. It is universal. *“God so loved the world.”* No one who believes is excluded. Almost with the same breath Jesus tells us that the promise belongs to each one who believes. *“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”* Can it be made any more personal?

We can find three points of similarity between our Old Testament history and this gospel text. The brass serpent of Moses had the form and appearance of the venomous, fiery snakes after which it was modeled. In a similar way Jesus was revealed in the form of our sinful flesh and had the needs and ways of an ordinary human being and was finally punished as a criminal. Second, just as the brass serpent had no poison and was completely harmless, so Jesus, although in appearance was like sinful men, was without sin, holy, harmless, undefiled. He hung on the cross and was cursed for the sins of others. And third, just as whoever looked at the brass serpent in faith remained alive, so also every sinner, poisoned by sin in all its forms, who now looks up to

Jesus, the Savior, in simple, trusting faith, shall not perish, shall not be punished with everlasting destruction, but have eternal life. For in Christ all sin has been conquered, all guilt has been taken away. There is complete redemption in Him.

One writer had this to say: Jesus now repeats this idea in a burst of Gospel-preaching which is without equal in the world's literature, which, in fact, summarizes the entire Gospel in one short sentence – what some have called ‘the Gospel in a nutshell’! ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*** (John 3:16 King James Version)

Through this act, God offers eternal salvation to the world – to all mankind. God offers “life” – eternal life. The word used here and many other places in the New Testament means “life” in its strongest sense, as God has given life. It isn’t used in the sense of “live it up in this world”. It signifies spiritual life. This word is frequently used for “eternal life” with its special emphasis upon the quality of life and its endless duration through the ages to come. This life is available only through belief in God's Son. The biblical concept of “eternal life” is more than just immortality, and it involves not only the soul but also the body. From creation man was made for never-ending life, not for death. The death and resurrection of Jesus provide the basis for real eternal life and give us the picture of the divinely prepared unending life which God has prepared and made ready for everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior from sin.

John emphasizes that this kind of life is eternal, unending, the life of the age to come. This is the same picture we have in Daniel 12:2: ***“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”*** But Jesus here tells us how this has become ours, and how it can be anyone’s – it is a gift of God. God’s grace is his undeserved love and mercy, and Scripture emphasizes that ***“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** (Ephesians 2:8-9) Because of that gift of God, we have eternal life.

To have eternal life means more than to live forever. The stress is more on the quality of life than on the quantity, though both are included.

Jesus repeats the idea with even greater emphasis: ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”***

God loved the world he created, even though the crown of that creation had gone bad and ruined it all. Our sins did not stop God from loving us. The sins of every single human being – from Adam and Eve to the most horribly wicked person in all of history down to the person you look at in the mirror – did not turn off God’s love. He loved the world and excluded no one.

We do not easily understand such love. Many Christians like to refer to this kind of love by its Greek name, agape. (uh gah’ pay) This kind of love is more than just a feeling. It doesn’t base its actions on how likable or worthy the object of love is. This is love that acts in the interest of the object of love. God did not like sin; he hated it. But he loved the people of the world, who were trapped in sin. And that is everyone.

God’s love brought results. He offered the ultimate sacrifice for the world he loved. He gave his one and only son – his only-begotten son. This giving meant more than just having him born of a virgin mother and called “Savior”. God gave his son as a necessary sacrifice for the world’s sin. God gave and sent his one and only son to die on the cross – the innocent one for all the guilty ones.

Jesus repeats what God’s gift means. ***“Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** With him faith saves, faith in the Son of God, who was given as a sacrifice in our place.

Those who believe in him shall not perish. Although we see many humans die, that’s just a physical death that ends our years on earth. This earthly, temporal death separates soul from body, and the body goes into the grave to decay and ultimately to be raised again on the last day. The soul of the believer in Christ goes immediately to be with the Savior in heaven. Believers live on forever with Jesus. We enjoy life with Jesus now already but after death we will know life in full glory.

Jesus laid out God’s plan of salvation for Nicodemus – and for us and for all mankind. Nicodemus did not expect what he heard. No human being could have devised such a plan. No one would have imagined it. It could not work without God. But here in the person of Jesus Christ was God, revealed in his divine Majesty.

God the Father loved the undeserving world so much that he sent his son to save it. God the Son, in the person of Jesus, came to fulfill the Father's will and win eternal life for all people. God the Spirit comes to work the faith people need to receive the gift of eternal life. He brings about a new birth.

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.” Jesus elaborates on the wonderful message. God sent his Son into the world for one reason – to save it. Many Jews thought that the Messiah would condemn the heathen and rescue only his chosen people, the Jews. They were wrong. He came to save all people of the world. The words are emphatic. God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world. Jesus did not come into the world as a human to judge, but to save.

Whoever believes in the Son of God is not condemned. Our sins have power to damn us, to condemn us. Still, some are condemned because they do not believe in the name of God's one and only son. Unbelief damns. The verdict is already in for unbelievers. God will simply confirm it publicly on Judgment Day.

God loved the world. God is the Author of salvation. He loved the world, all the people living in the world. There is none, no one, excepted. He proved this love with a deed so wonderful, so surpassingly beautiful, that it cannot be brought out strongly enough in words of human speech. God gave His only-begotten Son as a free gift, a present for the whole world. And such is His will and intention that He makes no exception: Everyone who believes in Him shall not perish, shall not see eternal destruction, but have everlasting life, the life in and with Jesus that shall have no end, but consists of bliss and joy through countless ages. What a contrast! The holy, eternal God and His equally holy and eternal Son giving the highest and best for the world, for fallen, corrupt humanity, for the bitter enemy of God! The sufferings and death of the Son of God is the punishment for the sins of the whole world. The Son of God dies so that the world, all the people in the world, might live in all eternity. God's death, God's blood, was thrown onto the scales in payment for the sins of the world. And there is nothing to be done on the part of sinners but to accept this atonement in faith; for faith accepts and appropriates the redemption of Christ. And the believer has eternal life even now, even here in time. He is sure of his salvation, because it is based upon the work of Jesus the Savior. For since God gives His Son, what does He hold back that He does not give? He gives Himself completely, as Paul says in Romans 8:32: ***“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”***

The mission of Jesus as the gift of God to the world was not to condemn the world, although the world had richly deserved such condemnation. The sole purpose of His coming was the salvation of the world.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”

And so today we have heard again from the mouth of Jesus the account of the way of salvation, a salvation which is absolutely all-encompassing. Thank you Lord Jesus for this eternal life-giving gospel! Amen.