

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2021

Psalm 107:1–9; 19 (ESV):

Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So

107 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!

2 Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
whom he has redeemed from trouble

3 and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

4 Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to a city to dwell in;

5 hungry and thirsty,
their soul fainted within them.

6 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

7 He led them by a straight way
till they reached a city to dwell in.

8 Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of man!

9 For he satisfies the longing soul,
and the hungry soul he fills with good things.

19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

First Reading: Numbers 21:4–9 (ESV):

The Bronze Serpent

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. 5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For

there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” 6 Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 7 And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

EPISTLE: Ephesians 2:1–10 (ESV):

By Grace Through Faith

2 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

THE GOSPEL - John 3:14–21 (ESV):

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God So Loved the World

16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18** Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already,

because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19** And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. **20** For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. **21** But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Sermon 11 – Fourth Sunday of Lent

“Putting on Heirs”

Ephesians 2:1-10

Dear friends,

In our epistle lesson today Paul makes an exceedingly complete statement. This is the Christian faith in its entirety in one paragraph. Maybe some details are missing but the broad strokes are all there. In the Old Testament and Gospel lesson you can see these words play out in many and various ways but the Epistle is certainly an excellent summary. It is not what Paul says here that is surprising, again this is Christian bread and butter if there ever was, but it is how Paul says it. He uses some strange phrases, does things in a few different ways, and we're going to try to analyze that and bring some sense to it. Firstly, Paul is using his words to highlight the fact that our problem is both everywhere, but also deeply personal. Secondly, Paul reminds us – several times actually – that the solution is something that has to come from outside us rather than something we can do for ourselves. Thirdly, Paul tells us that all this has consequences for ourselves here on this Earth, so let's get going with that.

As you can see, this is Ephesians chapter 2, and as you've no doubt guessed, Paul spends chapter 1 introducing the whole thing. Throughout chapter 1, Paul meanders through predestination, all the wonderful things Jesus has done, and gives thanks for the Christians in Ephesus and the good work Paul has done with them over the years they

spent together. And it has been years, Paul spends more time in Ephesus than any other city. On the tip of Turkey near the Aegean Sea, Ephesus is a major artery for trade and traffic through to the Turkish interior, it is the town center for an entire region, and so in basing himself here Paul is able to reach not just this part of Turkey but the shores of Macedonia and Greece as well. Paul knows these people, he knows where they're at, and this is why he treats them to this letter.

Here's how he starts: **“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience...”** Phrases like this are exactly why I decided to preach on this. It starts off bluntly and with incredible clarity and quickly becomes something else. Paul says that trespasses and sins, which we have, effectively render us dead. You're probably used to hearing stuff like this, but imagine hearing this for the first time. That the human race, for all its vitality, for all its energy and innovation and everything we've managed to achieve for the thousands of years we've owned this Earth... it's dead. None of it matters. The scientific criteria for life admittedly have some wiggle room but even if they didn't, we would still fit all of them. We move, we reproduce, we do all the things that life does, but Paul says here that we are dead. I've made zombie jokes in the past about this, but this is no joke. Sin means we die, we all know this, but Paul extends this out into the startling picture that sin means that you and I are already dead. It's not just that we will one day die, it's that we're dead right now. That dying has swallowed us up, swallowed up our achievements, our relationships, everything we ever do in this life, all the people we love and the memories we make, they're just dead. Dying is all we are, according to Paul, because none of what we do in this life can stop it. That is a morbid, bleak, and downright depressing statement. You are Christians, so you have life in Christ, which he will talk about, but for now he tells us that mankind is dead. Try not to let overexposure to that truth diminish its impact.

The phrase that really picked me out though was this talk of the prince of the power of the air. That is a really strange way to talk about the devil. The devil is called a lot of things. Jesus Himself refers to Him as the prince of this world, much of the Bible calls him Satan, accuser, and some places call him Lucifer, the pretty being of light. He is called tempter, he is called the ancient serpent, lots of very artistic, poetic names. But this one takes the cake. The prince of the power of the air. We have only theories as to why he gives the devil this name, it could just be another fancy name, but in light of everything else Paul says I think there's a reason for it. He talks about air, and air is all around us. It is everywhere, and those places where there is no air – think space, think the deep sea – are dangerous places. Why? Because not only is air all around us, we are tied to it. The human body requires air to power everything that it does, if we are deprived of it we die quickly. We need air to live, and part of the ecosystem of this world was literally built to provide us with that air. And it is tainted. That's the point that I think that Paul is making. The devil, Satan, is literally so much a part of this world that he's in the air. Sin is in the very air we breathe, rebellion against God is so woven into the fabric of this world that we participate in that rebellion with every breath we take. He's in the air, and everywhere is this ultimate act of treason, and we're doing it just by living. That's why I think Paul uses this. It's a remarkable picture of how our sin isn't just us, it's everywhere, and we can't ever avoid it, we can't ever be above it and beyond it. It pillories us just by breathing. Of course, Paul adds, the devil is not just there, he is actively at work, and that work is undoing the work God does in trying to bring order and goodness to this world. He's out there, he's working.

Paul goes on. **“3 Among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”** We all used to be like this, but now we are not. Paul starts off his talk about

grace reminding us of this, and telling us that everything awful he's talked about so far has been directly overturned. So we were once dead, now we are made alive. We were once enslaved to God's wrath, now we are free to be God's children. All this, Paul says, is due to God's great love and rich mercy. That God is not so committed to justice that He is willing to let His children die in their sins. He is committed to love, but not a love that ignores the evil, but a love that confronts the evil directly by providing a substitute so that we could survive God's punishment for evil. We were dead, we didn't earn this. We were the problem, and had no right to be part of the solution, but God wouldn't settle for that, so He provided Christ. Whether Christ is living or dead, He is still there to be all that we could not be, in life and death both, so that we could become alive.

It can't be us. That is such a central facet of Christianity and Lutherans sometimes go insane making this clearly, but that is because it is so not what our hearts believe. It couldn't be us. We could not accomplish this salvation, this becoming alive. Corpses can't get up and walk. Even in the movies you need a loose virus or bad magic to animate a corpse. We're the same. It couldn't be us. It had to be someone outside of us. Jesus was that someone. Sin deludes us into thinking we can save ourselves, and you see hints of this everywhere you look. If we do this, it'll be ok. If we all do that, this will be fixed. Maybe so, maybe not, but none of it will be enough for the viciously specific requirements that God has set for us. Perfect or no deal, that is what God says, and we are not perfect.

“By grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” So no more of this enslavement, no more of this living death, and we can trust it precisely because it comes from outside of us. Paul is vivid in his imagery here, using repetition of by grace you have been saved to hammer in the point. But Paul also pictures for us what that means. It means we are raised up, alive. More than that, we are seated in heaven. We have a place beside Jesus. Paul speaks on this like its already happened, and by God's

peculiar reckoning of time and space it has, and rather than confuse you I want that to encourage you. God sees you right now as that man or woman seated beside Christ in heaven. That is who you are to Him, not the sinner that seems to be walking through this life. Kindness is not something I would readily apply to God, grace maybe, but not kindness, he's always been somehow different than that. Paul shows me how wrong I am in that, though. He says that God is kind to us to show us His grace, and more than us, to show all history that grace.

So what does all this mean? That as bad as the problem of sin is, the solution is so much more potent and so much more trustworthy. You can for sure trust yourself to screw just about anything up, but more than that you can trust God to fix it. You can trust God to be kind far beyond your tremendous capacity to be cruel. You can trust God to be loving to you even at your worst. Not in a dismissive way, or an indulgent way, as if your sin doesn't matter, but in the way of a craftsman troubleshooting a project. He's going to work around in the guts and depths of your soul to remake you, to reforge you stronger, holier, and purer than you could ever hope to manage on your own.

Paul goes on to the result of all this: **“8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** He repeats it again, and does it so that we know that all this, our salvation, the good works that we do, the ups and the downs alike, have been planned for and compensated for by God. We are created to be virtuous, to do good things, and we never do as many of them as we should, and we never are as we should be, but God is the one who makes us what we should be. It is the preparation and the control that is so remarkable here. God isn't blindsided by any of this, He has meticulously planned for all of this. Man's sin, our failures, and His grace are all part of that plan. Our evil cannot stop His good for us.

What to say at the end? The deliberate and offputtingly final way that God speaks here is intended to shake our confidence in ourselves, and that confidence is natural and comes completely without our consent. It is just who we are. We are us and that should be enough, but it's not, and God's strong words here knock us off that pedestal. God wants us to doubt ourselves, and finally, despair of ourselves, because all we have to offer is sin. The very air we breathe is rank with it. Yet, the repetition of grace stands as well. If we are not to trust ourselves, we are to trust God and His grace. We are to trust Jesus and His holiness to be who we are and what we need to be, instead of us. Based on Paul's words here, that holiness both revives us from a living death and makes us valuable pieces in God's machine. We are God's workmanship, which means we are His projects, and God tinkers with His projects. Sometimes we would rather He not, but He tinkers because He loves His projects, He loves you, and He won't let your parts go to rust. He won't let your pieces fail. He won't let you be anything other than what He has created you to be: His beloved children.

Amen.