Lent 4B, 3.10.24

From Pastor Miriam Schmidt in All Saints in Big Sky

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

*We preach Christ crucified*

John 3:16 is one of those verses: *For God so loved the world* *that God gave the Son, the only begotten one,*

*so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.* Popularized in the 1970’s, by born again Rollen Stewart, he held up large signs emblazoned with this verse at sporting events. John 3:16 is not without problems, but it’s better than some verses. In a nutshell, it tells us: Out of love, God gave Jesus to the world, so that we might trust in Christ and have abundant life in him, starting now.

But there are other verses that could also be emblazoned on placards: Like Ephesians 2:4-5 that we heard this morning: *God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.* In short, God, out of mercy and love, brought us from death to life. This is pure grace, a gift we don’t have to earn.

I also think of another verse from a hymn that is beloved by many of us: *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found, twas blind, but now I see*.

Whichever one of these three you might prefer, all of them get to the heart of Christian faith. First, Christian faith says, we’ve got a problem: We are dead, or drowning, or lost, bound by sin, turned inward out of arrogance or self-hatred. We need help, help that must come from outside of ourselves. Second, our faith says, God offers an answer: God gives us help, freely, out of love we cannot comprehend. In baptism, God signs to us the washing away of sin’s power over us. In baptism, God raises us from a death-marked life to a resurrection-starred life. And God joins us to a community of saints, and promises, *I will keep pouring the Holy Spirit into your life, grace sufficient for each day.*

Every time, we welcome a new sibling into Christ, we get a reminder of the heart of our faith. We get that chance every time we celebrate a baptism and declare our sibling is saved by grace. And when the newly baptized is a little baby, unable to understand it all yet, our faith, the faith of the church, is enough to receive that child into this holy communion. Then we pray for them, nurture them, so one day, they too can trust in the love and grace of God.

Sometimes, the problem is so clear. We know we need saving, or at least some serious help. But sometimes we forget. Like the people of Israel in our Numbers reading this morning. They are grumbling, because they have forgotten that very recently they were slaves in Egypt who needed saving. God sent Moses who led them out of slavery to dance on the safe side of the sea, while the enemy army drowned. And then the people of God were hungry in the desert, and God provided them with manna. But in today’s story, they are sick to death of God’s bread of heaven; they are pining for Egypt, forgetting how awful it was to be enslaved. It takes the punishment of poisonous snakes for the people of God to wake up again to their need. *We need saving, now*, they cry to Moses. And though God does not do exactly what they ask, God provides them with an antidote, a strange bronze serpent. Simply look it at when you are bitten, and you will live.

Perhaps your own life holds such moments of clarity: When you were desperately clear that you needed help. The snakes were biting. Or you were drowning in your grief. Or you were literally dying of cancer, or abuse, or addiction. Or you were hungry, or sick, or alone, or in a war zone, and whether you were sure there was a God or not, you started praying for help.

Perhaps you also carry a story, a witness, to amazing grace. God found a ways to sprinkle grace into your life; it seemed like not enough at first, just breadcrumbs, but it was enough to find your way again. Or God put someone in your path, a friend, a neighbor, a child, a doctor, a therapist, to lighten your load, give you hope again. Or God found some other way to answer your prayer, to heal your snakebite, to set you free. In retrospect now you know: *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.*

But we are not always so clear about those moments, especially, those of us – middle class, primarily white - living in stable, even beautiful parts of the world. We are doing pretty well in comparison with Ukraine, and Gaza, and Sudan. We can get over-confidant in our prosperity. And so it doesn’t surprise me that the church is declining in the United States and Europe, in middle class pockets of affluence. But the church is taking off in places where people know they need saving, primarily the Global south and east. In the year 1900, 80% of Christians lived in the West, and now only 37% of the world’s Christians do. But there are some 400 plus million Christians in Asia, and some 700 plus million Christians in Africa. And the growing churches here in the USA and Europe–of all different denominations – are found mostly in immigrant communities. Latino congregations, Nigerian congregations, Chinese congregations, they are growing like wildfire.

So. As a primarily white, comfortable congregation in Montana, we are called to keep listening for stories of human need and God’s grace. It’s not hard to find them: We can access stories from across the world through the publications and websites of Global Refuge and Lutheran World Relief and ELCA World Hunger. Our Lutheran Synod has ties to the Bolivian Lutheran Church. We have ties to the tribal community at Our Savior’s in Rocky Boy. And, if we listen carefully, we may find we have neighbors – not far from us - who know what is was like to flee for their lives from a place that used to be home, and do the hard work of making a new home for the sake of the next generation. Newcomers or workers in our community who can tell us what it is like to be Christian in another part of the world. We can ask them questions: When were you lost, when did God find you? Where did you feel dead, and when did God make you alive again? But we need to be willing to listen. Ask good questions. Be vulnerable ourselves.

Ephesians reminds us today that *we are God’s masterpiece, created for good works that God has prepared for us.* One of these good works is sharing our stories of snakebite and amazing grace with each other. These stories are powerful. They bring us to faith, again and again.