

Season of LENT

Prayers

Let us pray for the temporal and eternal needs of both the Church and the world.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserve only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Psalm 107:1-9 (antiphon v. 19)
Numbers 21:4-9
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

Hymns

Hymn of the Day – 571
Other Hymns – 918 (OT), 702 (OT, G), 744 (E), 580 (G), 543

For bold, unwavering trust in God's grace, that we may rejoice in all the good gifts from above that we neither merit nor deserve, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the faithful proclamation of Christ's saving name, that God's people may be strengthened in the true faith and His Gospel Kingdom extended to all nations, to the very ends of the earth, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For our congregation, its mission and its people; for the ability to meet the needs that arise as we do the work God has given us to do; and for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace among us and all the congregations of our Synod, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the seminaries of our Synod, our preschools and day schools, that all the baptised, both those who teach and those who learn in them, would be transformed by the wisdom of Christ, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the prime minister and parliament, for the premier and legislature of this province; and for all government agencies, civil servants, judges and officers of the law, that peace, security and justice may be preserved, allowing freedom and opportunity to share the Good News of the message of Christ, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who are sick, [especially _____], that God would grant healing to their bodies and strength to bear their infirmities with patience and grace, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all who mourn the loss of family and friends, [especially for _____], that they may find comfort in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

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For those who suffer from the lack of any human necessity, that those who have been blessed with an abundance may cheerfully share, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who rejoice in the rich blessings of God, that they may always remember the Giver of every gift and give Him heartfelt thanks, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

O Lord, God of heaven and earth, merciful and gracious, holy and loving, graciously receive our prayers, deliver and preserve us for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord, our once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Remember not our sins, but forgive, renew and strengthen us to fight the good fight of the faith. Protect us from the assaults and temptations of the devil, the world and even our own sinful flesh. Grant us repentance and faith, holy lives to match godly intentions, and perseverance until You return or call us home, for to You alone we give all glory, honour and worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**



LENTEN SERMON

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

(Series B)

MARCH 10, 2024

Sermon Text: Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-16

“With Eyes And Ears Of Faith Look To Christ”

Grace peace and mercy to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

How easily are you offended? The world seems obsessed with being offended, with taking offence, and many people find themselves walking on eggshells with every word they speak, or tweet or type just to avoid the backlash and trouble that offence might bring. By nature sinners (as we heard last week) take offence at being made to look at his or her sin, at being challenged with the law of the Lord; while the sinner with a heart of repentance when made to face their sin, desires to be forgiven by God, to make amends, to live their life differently for the good of all. As we walk our way to Good Friday and the remembrance of the crucifixion of Jesus our Lord, we’re repeatedly asked to set our eyes on Him who hung there upon the cross at Calvary and who for our sake was made “to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Now, in the dark of your house, in the dead of night, you may use your fingers to see your way to the bathroom, and physically blind people use their fingertips to read books. When you open a milk carton near its ‘best before date’ you may use your nose perhaps even your tongue to see if the milk is expired. If upon arriving home you found the door to your house open unexpectedly, you might listen to see if someone was in the house before you entered. The most common and straight-forward way to see however, is to use our eyes. And we also use our mind to see . . . for even as we considered these examples, you might have imagined in your mind your house in the dark of night, or the brand of milk you regularly buy, or what the door to your house looks like.

In last Sunday’s Epistle Reading we heard St. Paul say that “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” And this image of Jesus nailed to a wooden cross brings out a response in people. Some, maybe even you, don’t want to hear about Jesus’ crucifixion in preaching because they don’t want to be challenged to see Him there with their mind. Some of us could not be enticed to watch a movie like Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” because we don’t want the memory of that film in our mind interfering with what we see in our mind

when we hear a sermon preached to us in church. And then, for some just looking at a crucifix . . . that image of Jesus upon the cross . . . will cause uneasiness. Some imagine it to be a stumbling block to sharing the Gospel; for others it is thought of as foolishness because Jesus is now risen from the dead. At the same time, however, no one seems to object to seeing the baby Jesus depicted in the manger at Christmas in a similar fashion. So it is that even among Christians offence starts to creep in when we are confronted with Jesus' death upon the cross.

No, the sinner in us doesn't like to look at sin; and our flesh and blood doesn't like to look upon death – the two things embodied in preaching Christ crucified and in works of art depicting the crucifixion of Jesus.

At the beginning of Lent we marked our walk toward Good Friday with a stark reminder, “remember you are dust and to dust you shall return” – a paraphrase of God's judgement pronounced upon Adam: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” So when Christ Jesus, the new Adam, who did not sin and who has no sin in Him, hangs dead upon the cross because of my own fault, my own most grievous fault, with all my sins and iniquities upon Him; I must then face sin and death. In the crucifixion of Jesus, whether we see it with our ears and our mind in preaching or in hymns or in the reading of Scripture, or with our eyes if we looked upon a painting or a movie or a crucifix – we are each faced with the results of our sin and the reality of death. And there's one more unsettling thing. We believe, teach and confess in the words of the Athanasian Creed that: “Jesus is both perfect God and perfect man, composed of a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father with respect to His divinity, less that the Father with respect to His humanity.” And in our Lord's crucifixion you are thus confronted with the fact that you have not only murdered the man Jesus with your sin, but you have also played your part in murdering God because this Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” He is simultaneously both God and Man . . . and hangs there dead because of the sin of Adam, the sin that brought mortality and death to us all.

Why look upon such a horrible thing? What good could come from thinking about it, hearing about it, meditating upon it, seeing depictions of it? Can't we just rush past it to Easter morning and the empty tomb? Why should we have to see it!? Isn't it bad enough that my sins and death itself bite me all day with their poisonous fangs like fiery serpents, their coiling bodies constricted about me, squeezing what life I have in me right out of me? And now I must look upon them and all the pain and suffering they have caused my dearest Jesus who didn't even deserve it? “Lord, have mercy!”

In the Old Testament Reading we see the Children of Israel plagued by literal fiery serpents in the wilderness, and we hear about God's command to Moses to “make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole” so that the people may look upon it and live. In The Gospel Reading, Jesus points back to that event . . . making the connection that He Himself would be like the bronze serpent crafted by Moses at God's command in the wilderness and lifted up on that pole before the eyes of the people.

So it is when we look upon Christ crucified. On the one hand, we see the very thing that causes us guilt and pain and suffering in this life – we see our sin and we see death, we see the cruelty and injustice of the world, we see the very fingerprints of Satan the devil who Jesus says was, “a murderer from the beginning.” On the other hand, in the crucifixion of Jesus we are invited to see our salvation and the salvation of the whole world because Jesus Himself

in our makes His cross and passion, His crucifixion the context, the background, the very location of what is probably the most familiar passage in all of Holy Scripture: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Yes, there upon the cross of His crucifixion, Jesus was ultimately, finally, completely given for the salvation of the world. So it is that St. Paul in his letter to the Christians of Galatia says, “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” And again: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’” And as we see our dear Lord’s arms outstretched, nailed to those wooden beams in our place . . . as we see His feet nailed there for our breaking of the law of the Lord; we know that, as the prophet Isaiah declares, “He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed.” And having our faith and hope and trust in this truth invites us to now see the crucifixion with new eyes.

Our dear teacher Doctor Luther while preaching on the Gospel of John comments that, “The custom of holding a crucifix before a dying person has kept many in the Christian faith and has enabled them to die with a confident faith in the crucified Christ.” By His prophet Moses God told the obstinate and impatient Israelites that “everyone who is bitten [by the fiery serpents], when he sees [the bronze serpent set upon the pole], shall live.” Later through His prophet Isaiah God said to His people “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” Jesus Himself teaches, “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the Last Day.” And St. John later in his Gospel records how the events of the crucifixion unfolded in order to fulfil what was prophesied by God’s prophet Zechariah that, “they will look on Him whom they have pierced,” that the very sight of Jesus upon the crucified would cause those who looked upon Him to “mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over Him, as one weeps over a firstborn.”

To be sure, there is a strong temptation to turn away from such grief and guilt and sadness, such pain and sorrow. During that first Holy Week some Greeks came to Jesus’ disciple Philip and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And what was Jesus’ answer? “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” These Greeks did not know what they were asking to see. But Jesus knew His glory would be in His Passion and cross not in the things that the world finds glorious. His “face was set like a flint” as He made His way to the time and place of His crucifixion . . . and all the way He was looking your sin and death in the face and was not going to be put off from His task. He was not going to turn away from what was before Him; for as He Himself had said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

To be sure, by nature we would look away from all this; but Jesus does not. He sees the work of saving you through to the end. And this is the gift He gives to you because “when we were dead in our trespasses, [the love of God] made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Yes, “by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Having the eyes to see and the ears to hear all this is a precious gift. Grow in that faith by following the advice given us by the writer of Hebrews: “Look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” To be sure, the cross of Christ and Him crucified is a humbling remedy for your sin. It calls you to admit that you’re a hopelessly lost sinner. It calls you into the light of Christ, into the very nature of His true love and glory. Do not be offended by it; rather, be comforted by it because there on the cross you can see how much God loves you – His own Son laying down His life for you. And to which we can only exclaim: “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever!” With the eyes and ears of faith believe and look upon Christ crucified and live. Amen.