

March 22, 2009
Lent 4

"There Is a Cure for the Bite of Sin"

JOHN 3:14-21

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

How well have you done this past week in the "complaint department?" If we hold up a complain meter (hold up meter) with an arrow from 1 to 10, how well did you do controlling your grumbling and complaining. If you did quite well this past week, then give yourself a 8,9. If you were on again off again, thankful one day, complaining the next, give yourself a 5 or 6. If you had thankless thoughts and complained almost every hour, give yourself a 1 or even a zero.

In our reading for today from the Old Testament we heard how the Lord sent poisonous serpents or snakes to bite his people when they grumbled about the nutritious manna that God daily provided. It wasn't the first time they lashed out in anger against God. They often complained about the tough journey through the desert. The poisonous snakes were so venomous that people started dying right and left. They pleaded with the Lord to spare them. The Lord told Moses to put a brass snake on a pole and hold it up to the people. Anyone who looked at the brass snake was healed instantly.

Jesus used this miraculous cure from snake bite to teach a man named Nicodemus that he had to look to a miracle from God to be saved from sin, not to his own resources and strength. If sin is only a little scratch, then I can get rid of it by myself with a little ointment and a band-aid. If sin is more like the bite of a venomous snake, then I need to have a cure that goes beyond the medicine we have in a first aid kit. Let's listen to Jesus this morning as he tells us that **"There Is a Cure for the Bite of Sin."**

The bite is nasty

The bite of sin is so nasty and there are no human cures to be found. That is why Jesus spoke these words to Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Moses lifted up the brass snake in the desert and put it on a pole, because that was the cure God gave to save people from the venomous snake bites that claimed their lives with

painful deaths.

You can see what sin does to people by the example of this man Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night looking for a way to cure himself of the problem of sin. He came to Jesus with these words, "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." Do you see what Nicodemus wanted? He wanted Jesus to help him clean up the wounds of sin. First a little antiseptic of goodness, then a little peroxide of kindness, then some iodine of keeping the commandments, and finally a band-aid over the wound and everything would be right with God.

What did Jesus do for this man? He told him the shocking news, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." To be born again means you put your trust in God's plan to save you, not the little band-aids that you think you can place over the things you have done wrong. I may be able to patch up my relationship with someone I hurt, by saying, "I am sorry" and then show them kindness and love, but this does not work with God because sin is such a deep wound that only God can take away the problem.

Jesus has given us an excellent illustration for sin when he referred to what happened in the desert with the snakes. Think about how a snake will bite a person, and then the glands that hold the poison simultaneously pump the venom through the teeth into the body. Sin is like the bite of the snake. It strikes us, but then it injects its venom into our system. Listen to these chilling words from James 1. "But each one is tempted when by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." Think of King David, bitten by a lust for Bathsheba, and then the venom found its way into his system. He committed adultery with her, and even murdered her husband, and then kept this sin to himself for almost a year. What did Adam and Eve do after sinning against the Lord in the Garden? They foolishly tried to hide from God, and then Adam accused his wife Eve of leading him astray.

Sin is so destructive because it leads to eternal death and punishment. What are the consequences of not having God's cure for sin? You know the words from John 3:16 about not perishing. It says also in our text that whoever does not believe is condemned. Sin brings death into the world. The Lord told Adam and Eve the day that they rebelled against him they would die. Our bodies start to break down, our hair turns gray, our joints creak, our teeth fall out, as we slowly begin to break down and die. Romans 6 says, "The wages of sin is death." In addition to physical death, there is the problem of eternal death, eternal separation from God, what the Bible calls condemnation. Romans 5 says of all people, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death all to all men, because all have sinned."

The bite of sin is so nasty because of how it twists our thinking. Jesus said in the words of our text. "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." Think back to the people bitten by the snakes in the desert. See the father watching his son die from snake bite, writing in pain, foaming at the mouth, burning up with fever. Parents are returning from the snake on the pole with their children perfectly cured. How foolish a father would be to not run as fast as he could,

look up to the brass snake and then see his child cured immediately! When it comes to the free gift of forgiveness and the free cure for sin that Jesus offers, people stubbornly cling to their good works, or think they need to let Jesus do his part but it is still up to them to do their part. "I'll try and do my best and hope in luck for all the rest." Light comes into the world, and people prefer the darkness of sin, and the false hope of saving themselves to what Jesus freely offers.

We hear the battle cry today, "Follow your heart! Follow your heart!" "Do what you think is right, and everything will be fine." But then we hear the words of Jeremiah 17 that tell us, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Nicodemus came to Jesus following his heart and working on his own cure. Jesus told him he needed a new heart or a new birth that would look up to a Son of Man being lifted up on a cross as the source of salvation, not into himself.

The cure is perfect

Thank God the cure we have sin does not have anything mixed into it that depends on what I can produce and provide. It is entirely something God carefully works out and then administers for me. We are amazed at how certain medicines today can reduce high blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and lower anxiety. We stand in awe of what the aspirin can do for the heart and inflammation and pain and headache. Nothing compares to the cure that God planned for us from all eternity. It is based on God giving us his Son. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

God loves the world. He loves all these people who have been bitten by sin and who want to continue to be bitten by sin and then think they can cure themselves. He loves them by giving up his Son to be the cure. The cure was amazing. Jesus was lifted up on a cross the way Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. Listen to how this cure is described in 2 Corinthians 5 where it says, "God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might become the righteousness of God." The cure was so amazing because every sin ever committed was taken by Jesus upon himself. He became sin for us who knew no sin. He took the sin, paid for it, and removed it. In John 15 Jesus says we are clean through the Word he has spoken to us. On the cross he cried out, "It is finished!" The cure was complete.

The night before his death, Jesus entered into the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples and prayed an amazing prayer to his heavenly Father that shows how he was willing to come up with a cure for our problem of sin. He prayed, "Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from me, not my will but yours be done." Being fully human but also fully God Jesus prayed to his Father and asked if were possible for people to be cured without drinking the cup of suffering for their sin. The answer that came back was obvious. There was no other way. Jesus drank the cup to its last bitter drop so that you and I might enjoy a perfect cure this morning.

At the end of this conversation with Nicodemus about a cure for sin Jesus said, "But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." When you are born again and come into the

light, the cure that Jesus carried out for you becomes the foundation of your life. He allows you to wake up every morning, and close every day rejoicing the cure that has been provided for you. Psalm 103 begins with these words that offer us a cure for grumbling and complaining that so often enters our lives. "Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits-- who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion." What an amazing cure we have in Jesus, a cure that lets us shout for joy every day as we sang in the hymn:

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.
Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.
There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*