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Lent 4
John 3:14-21
3/18/12

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father -- to him be glory and power for ever and ever. (Rev 1:5-7)

John 3:14-21

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Complaining, whining, grumbling, impatience – these were the constant refrains of God’s chosen people – the Israelites.

After God, with a mighty hand, brought them out of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites complained that they were trapped between the waters of the Red Sea and the fury of the Egyptian army. So God parted the sea and gave his people an escape. Then they complained that they didn’t have any water to drink in the desert. So God brought water out of a rock, enough for all the people. Then they grumbled that they didn’t have any food. So God sent bread from heaven every morning so they could all eat their fill – they didn’t even have to work for it, just pick it up. But the people grew tired of the manna every day and grumbled about that, too! Then the Israelites disagreed with God they didn’t trust God when they saw the powerful peoples already living in the promised land of Canaan. They were sure they would die, so they refused to go in, even though God promised he would give them victory.

God finally had enough. His divine patience with Israel’s constant impatience had run out. So God sentenced the Israelites to forty years of wandering the rough country of the Sinai Peninsula. One-by-one, the over-twenty crowd of the Israelites died off. Slowly, but surely, a new generation took over responsibility and leadership among the tribes of Israel.

But the incessant whining and complaining didn’t die off with their parents and grandparents. **“They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’”** (Numbers 21:4,5).

Oh, boy...now they’ve done it! What would you expect God to do with these ungrateful Israelites? What do you do when your children grumble, complain, and talk back to you? First, God was going to get their attention. He was going to make sure they understood their sin. Then he would provide healing, rescue, through faith.

Through Jesus, God has done the same. Through Jesus, God gives healing and rescue – salvation through faith. Jesus brought that good news to a man named Nicodemus one night under the cover of darkness. Jesus, because he knew he was going to die, could give the promise of salvation through faith.

Word was getting around. Jesus of Nazareth was not the ordinary, run-of-the-mill rabbi. He did things no other rabbi would think of attempting. He did miracles, he had already changed water into wine at a wedding in Cana. He took control of the abuses happening at the temple, driving out all who

would make a mockery of God's house with their greed. It was becoming obvious that Jesus possessed some divine power and authority.

Nicodemus wanted to know more. Either from a desire to satisfy religious curiosity, or to fulfill some inner spiritual emptiness, Nicodemus finds himself knocking on Jesus' door late one evening. As a Pharisee and religious leader among the people, Nicodemus had to come secretly. But he had to come, he wanted to know if Jesus was indeed God's Anointed One – the promised Savior.

Jesus got right to the issue. He took Nicodemus' focus from the here and now to the reason Christ had come in the first place – to bring spiritual rebirth and eternal life to those who believe in him. In the process of explaining his purpose, Jesus also explained what had brought him there in the first place – God's love.

To put this heavenly truth of God's love into terms Nicodemus would understand, Jesus used God's dealing with the rebellious children of Israel. When the Israelites rebelled once again, when they grumbled against God and took his love and care for granted, he withdrew his protection and allowed poisonous snakes to bite the people. They needed to feel the sting of their sin. They needed to understand their sin. That doesn't seem very loving, does it? Until you consider the alternative, God could have left them to continue in their sin, to destroy themselves and rebel themselves to death in hell. As they were dying, they pleaded with Moses to seek God's help. In undeserved love and mercy, God provided a way.

He had Moses build a bronze snake and place it on top of a pole for all to see. God's promise was that those who looked to the snake would be healed, they would live. How silly that must have seemed. It was just a bronze snake on a pole. But that snake had God's promise of forgiveness and healing attached to it. That promise of God gave the people faith to look to the snake and they were healed.

Jesus explained to Nicodemus, **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up...”** Already in these early days of his ministry, Jesus was looking ahead to his crucifixion. He knew he had to **“be lifted up”**.

Jesus had to be lifted up because we are so much like those Israelites in the wilderness. It's amazing, isn't it, that they kept grumbling and complaining against God? I mean, come on, after all they had seen! After all they had experienced! Their own two eyes saw God's great acts of love and power. Their own two eyes saw God part a sea and give them dry ground on which to cross. Their own two eyes saw water gush from a rock and bread fall from heaven. What more did God need to do for them!?

But then we stop and look at ourselves. What more could God possibly do for you? Look at all he has provided for you! Look at all he has done for you! He has given you more wealth than you really need – I mean *need*. He has given you caring family and friends. He has given you your health. He protects and preserves you from danger. And those are just the physical blessings God has given to you! On top of all that he gives you spiritual blessings that are worth far more: his Word, his Church, his Sacraments, his forgiveness, his Son! And what do we do? We grumble and complain. We despise God and his Word. We focus on the lesser gifts and ignore the greater spiritual gifts. What more could God possibly do for you!?

There's nothing more God could do for you because he's already done it all. He's already taken care of your sin – **“the Son of Man must be lifted up...”** This **“must”** is so very wonderful, isn't it? It points

ahead to the love of God, of which Jesus speaks more fully in the well-known verse 16: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...”** Not something good, attractive, or deserving in mankind, not some debt God had to pay to mankind, but God’s own incredible, boundless love provided the **“must”** for the crucifixion. Divine love could not rest until the Father had sacrificed his Son – and the Son had sacrificed himself – for mankind doomed to death by his own fault.

Because of Jesus’ love for you, he had to **“be lifted up”**. Jesus had to be lifted up so he could provide healing and forgiveness for all your sin.

Jesus explained to Nicodemus why he needed to be lifted up. **“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.”** Like those Israelites dying in the wilderness, who looked to the bronze snake and lived, who by God’s grace trusted his promise of forgiveness – Jesus directs our eyes to himself on the cross so we might see the depth of God’s love for us in his sacrifice and therefore live eternally. Looking to Jesus on the cross is the only sure way for our souls to escape eternal death.

And we look to Jesus in faith. **“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.”**

In just a few verses, Jesus repeats an invitation to you and me to enjoy his amazing love. He’s very clear about his desire that we believe in him and live. He invites you to look to him, lifted up on the cross for you to win your forgiveness. He invites you to look to him and to know his love and to be saved.

Through that good news of God’s saving love, Jesus send his Holy Spirit so you do look to him in faith. Left on our own, stuck in sin as we were, we would have rejected Jesus’ love. But the Holy Spirit works through God’s Word to give you faith to trust him, to give you faith to look to Jesus and to be saved.

Perhaps he did that for you when you were brought to the water of Holy Baptism, where his forgiveness and life were poured out on you through water and the Word. Perhaps it was through hearing the message of God’s soul-saving love that the Holy Spirit worked to bring you to faith and to look to Jesus as your Savior. Whatever the case, Jesus’ love moved him to be lifted up on the cross for your forgiveness and now that forgiveness is yours through faith.

That’s God promise for you. Because he knew he was going to die, Jesus promised salvation through faith. His promise is for you. And his promise will never be taken from you.

Amen

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Eph 1:3)

Amen