

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
14 March 2021  
John 3:14-21

Let me start my sermon by telling you a story I read in Sports Illustrated a while back. "A college-football coach was faced with the possibility that his star player might be declared academically ineligible, so he pleaded with the math professor not to flunk the kid. 'Tell you what, coach,' said the professor, 'I'll ask him a question in your presence. If he gets it right, I'll pass him.' The athlete was called in, and the professor asked, "What's two and two?" "Four," replied the player. Frantically the coach cried, "Give him another chance! Give him another chance!"

Today we celebrate the God of the second chance. All the readings this Sunday show us the same Biblical pattern: first, we see an identified group burdened by a particular affliction. Second, we see that the way they have reacted to the affliction has not solved the problem but has worsened the problem. Then we see the group turning to the Lord in prayer, with repentant and contrite hearts. After this, we see God's intervention on their behalf, which solves the problem. At the right time God rescues his people, liberating them, feeding them, healing them, and helping them find their way home. This is our God! Our God is the God of the second chance. He does not rejoice in the destruction of the sinner but would go through any extent to rescue us from our own self-destruction.

In the reading of Numbers, we see a famous story. The Israelites are wondering in the wilderness after their exile from Egypt. In their hunger, they rebelled against God and against Moses cursing the day they left Egypt. The book tells us that God punished them by sending them poisonous serpents, which killed some of them. After repenting from their sin, God directed Moses to make a snake of bronze and place it on a pole. The pole was to be placed at the center of the encampment. Whenever someone got bitten, all they needed to do was look at the pole and be healed. The people had a problem: They were hungry. They responded poorly to the problem: They rebelled against God and Moses, which made the problem worse. They repented from their sin and turned to God and he gave them a second chance and saved them.

In Ephesians, Paul retells the story of a people who "were dead through the trespasses and sins in which they once lived." They responded to their lostness by "following the course of this world," and the known philosophies of the day. These solutions did not work for the Gentiles any more than blind obedience to the law worked for the Jews. The Ephesians repented from their sin and turned to God by accepting Jesus. God in turned saved them. Paul says, "By grace you have been saved through faith,

and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

In the Gospel of John today, Jesus makes a connection between his cross and the bronze snake that Moses made in the desert. In his infinite mercy God gave his people a second chance. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “The Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” The cross of Jesus is the instrument God used for our redemption. As we confront the many temptations that afflict our bodies and souls, we are to look at the cross and be healed. When we feel the most disconnected from God and he seems to be very far away from us, we need must look at the cross of Jesus, and remember that he died to reconcile us with the God we have offended. Just when we feel the most beaten up by life and the most defeated by our circumstances, we are invited to look at the man dying on the wood and his great sacrifice of obedience. The God dying on the cross is a relatable God. He knows what it feels like to suffer, to be in pain, to be betrayed, to be forgotten, to be alone, to be ridiculed, to be thirsty and hungry, and to be the outcast, the loner, and the undesirable.

When doubts and depression fill our hearts with anxiety and fear, we must look at the cross of Jesus. He is the symbol of God’s love for us. God invites us to find comfort on that wood because Jesus is not there by accident, he is there on a rescue mission on our behalf. “For God so loved you and I that he sent his only son to die that we might not die but have everlasting life.” He is the Good Shepherd in search of his lost sheep. He is the Prodigal Father in search of his sinful prodigal son. When we feel despised and abandoned by God, all we need to do is to look at the cross and see him dying there for us, and then we need to ask ourselves, can anyone else love me this much?

Let me tell you a brief story to illustrate this point. There was a man who had a terrible argument with his teenage boy, after which the boy run away from home. Soon after the boy left, the man began to search for him, traveling to various places to look for him. After spending three years on the road and tens of thousands of dollars, the old man received a credible tip that his son was in South Spain. He flew to the town where the boy was rumored to be. After looking and asking about the boy without success, he decided to place an ad in the local paper: “Dear Jose. This is your dad. I have traveled hundreds of miles looking for you. I forgive you for everything and I ask for your forgiveness. I love you and I miss you. I am worried about you. Please come to the Plaza Fernandez tomorrow at 1:00 pm so we may talk. I want nothing more than to embrace you again and to show you how much I love you. Love dad.” The next day at 1:00 in the afternoon, there were hundreds of men and young boys named Jose, waiting at the Plaza Fernandez, looking for forgiveness from their fathers. To the old man’s joy, his son was one of them.

My friends the truth of our lives is that we all need forgiveness from our father. The second truth is that he will do anything he can to bring us back to him. Sometimes he

uses the intervention of others. Sometimes he uses our illnesses and adverse life circumstances. He will use anything and anyone to bring us back to him. He is willing to lift up his only son on a cross that we may find our way home by accepting him; that we may find acceptance and love by accepting him; that we may find liberation from anything that binds us by accepting him; that we may find the strength to go on by accepting him; that we may find the answers to life's questions by accepting him; that we may find happiness and joy by accepting him, and that we may find eternal life by accepting him.

Jesus dying on the cross voluntarily is God's way of telling us, "I love you and I want to save you. I am waiting for you to invite me in, and I will change your life when you do. I will give you a second chance." But, my brothers and sisters, God loves us too much to take our free will away from us. He will wait for us to invite him in. He will continue to wait for us to face the cross. But if we give our backs to the Son of God and his great sacrifice for us, God will not impose himself on us. God will not break us and humiliate us until we have no choice but to come to him. This is not the way God operates. He is a God of freedom and not a God of slavery. He will patiently wait for us, but he will not force our hand. He will invite us, but he will not shame and guilt us into submission. He sets the banquet of his son for us, but the decision remains ours as to whether we will accept him or not. His son died on the cross that we may be saved, not because of our works but because of his love for us, but it is up to us whether we accept this free gift or whether we choose not to accept it.

Unfortunately, many have chosen to reject this free gift. They believe they have found a better way out of their isolation and pain. They believe that if salvation is at all possible, they can get there on their own merits. They fail to see how truly desperate our human condition is. We need help. There are snakes at our heels, and these types of snakes require expert handling. Traying to save ourselves is a futile exercise. We need God's Messiah.

I pray that you and I will continue to invite him into our lives. I pray that we continue to have the courage to look at the cross and to see his dying son as sufficient proof of God's love for us. Amen!