

March 10, 2024

John 3:14-21

THE JOURNEY TO LIFE ...

“Words We Want To Hear!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Journey to Life goes through the valley of the shadow of death. Those are words that we would rather not hear. Are you afraid of dying? We may or may not be at any given moment since we are simultaneously saints and sinners - unafraid and afraid. We can go back and forth for various reasons. It would be nice to avoid the whole experience and just be in paradise. But you will recall that the converted thief on the cross next to Jesus still went through his crucifixion and breathed his last. Or maybe we have a conscience that is guilty and afraid of meeting God. No matter what the issue may be it must be put to rest in the love of God at the cross of forgiveness. We need to be reassured that our sins are indeed forgiven by the empty tomb of Jesus. We need to know that we are loved ... and you are! “For God so loved ...” YOU! We read in *Gerhard’s Sacred Meditations*:

There is no peace of mind without the love of God. The [unbelieving] world and the devil are its greatest source of trouble, but God is its true and highest rest. There is no peace of conscience except to those who are justified by faith; there is no true love of God except in those who have childlike trust in God. Therefore let the love of ourselves, the love of the [unbelieving] world, the love of the creature, die in us, that the love of God may dwell in us; and may God begin that love in us in this life, that he may perfect it in life eternal.

The Journey to Life goes through the valley of the shadow of death ... but as David says ... “I will fear no evil, for you are with me ...” No one wants to face death alone. The wonderful truth is that we really don’t face death alone for we have the good shepherd who makes us to lie down in green pastures and who leads us beside still waters! He is with you in this life with his rod and staff - to keep you on the straight and narrow - and he is there on the other side of eternity waiting for you with open arms to embrace you as his own with his perfect and never-ending love.

Luther was not able to be at the bedside of his father when his father left this world behind. This was very disappointing for Luther as it would potentially be for any one of us. However, he wrote a letter to his father and saw this as a way for him to be present with him. To his father Luther wrote:

I commend you to him [to Jesus] who loves you more than you love yourself. He has proved his love in taking your sins upon himself and paying for them with his blood as he tells you by the gospel. He has given you grace to believe by his Spirit, and has prepared and accomplished everything most surely, so that you need not care or fear anymore, but only keep your heart strong and reliant on his Word and faith.

I like those words: “Jesus has *proved* his love.” And this takes us to our Old Testament reading and our Gospel lesson for this morning and to **Words We Want To Hear!** We find ourselves in the midst of proof that everything is going to be alright when we come to the close of our lives down here. Before the words, “For God so loved the world [you], that he gave his only Son ...” we have the mentioning of an event that took place in the wilderness long ago at the time of the exodus of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. This event was designed to be a picture pointing to Jesus to comfort and assure us.

In the Old Testament Reading we see the children of Israel plagued by literal fiery serpents in the wilderness. These serpents pictured the plagues with which we suffer from every day - the plagues of sin, death, and hell. We have been bitten by that ancient serpent called "Satan." Racing through our blood is a horrible poison with which none of us can do anything to stop. But we also 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 our Gospel lesson, 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 a pole before the eyes of the people for healing. The snake, attached to the pole, was to be a picture of the future crucified Son of God in the flesh who in his work would put to death the snake and his venom and thereby make and give the anti-venom in the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Bruno, a bishop in the middle ages comments:

Moses raised up a bronze serpent in the wilderness so that people, smitten by serpents, might see it and be healed. So also Christ was raised up on the cross so that whoever sees him with the eyes and the mind and believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. For there is no other medicine that is able to heal man from the first poison of the serpent. The Lord properly wished to be figured in that serpent, since as that serpent possessed a certain likeness to the serpents yet he did not have the harmful poison of a serpent, so also our Savior, although regarded as a sinner and crucified between robbers and having the likeness of the flesh of sin, as the apostle says [Rom. 8:3], nonetheless was himself without sin. For he appeared "in likeness of the flesh of sin so that because of sin he might condemn sin in the flesh."

Words We Want To Hear! 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 our death, we see the cruelty and injustice of the unbelieving world, we see the very fingerprints of Satan the accuser 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. All of this serves as the backdrop for the words of John 3:13, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

To believe in him means to look to him for yourself. In that we say: "Jesus was lifted up for me! Jesus suffered for all my sins for me! Jesus died my death for me! Jesus took the poison of my hell for me!" Thus we look to the cross. To look at the cross means that you believe that these things happened for you, that you might be forgiven and not perish.

When Luther was preaching on the gospel of John he said: "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." This custom, from long ago, is not by any stretch required of us. In fact, I know of no Lutheran pastor who has ever done that at a death bed. But the idea was to remind the one dying that their only hope is found in Jesus. Instead of holding up a cross before a dying person it might be preferable

to simply quote the following words of our Lord and Savior: “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.” Indeed! We look on the one who was pierced so that water and blood might cleanse and strengthen us unto everlasting life. **Words We Want To Hear!** *On The Journey to Life*. Do you remember our sermon hymn? It was “Abide With Me.”

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies.

That hymn was written by Henry F. Lyte who had served for twenty-four years as a pastor in England. A fatal illness had already seized him and he was about to leave England to prolong his life, if possible, in the South. Toward evening he walked down his garden path to the seaside and there thought out the imagery and many of the lines of his famous hymn: “Abide With Me.” Returning to his home, he wrote out the hymn. He left at once for the south of France, and soon after his arrival in Nice his strength failed him, whispering the words, “Peace! Joy!” while he was pointing his hand heavenward, he died.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies.
Heaven’s morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!

“For God so loved ...” YOU! Jesus has *proved* his love to you. He has loved you to death ... to death so that you might not perish but have eternal life!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott

<https://lutheranreformation.org/theology/luther-care-dying/>

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