

“TAKE ME TO A BETTER LIFE!!”

Series: “Promises, Promises”

The Fourth Sunday in Lent - B

March 15, 2015

Peace Lutheran
Grass Valley, CA

WHAT KIDS SAY:

- I believe you should live each day as if it is your last, which is why I don't have any clean laundry because, come on, who wants to wash clothes on the last day of their life? –Age 15
- For centuries, people thought the moon was made of green cheese. Then the astronauts found that the moon is really a big hard rock. That's what happens to cheese when you leave it out. – Age 6

TEACHING POINTS:

- 1) Complain, complain, complain.
- 2) Complaining people were asking Moses to take them to a “better life.”
- 3) God provided an out by asking the people to face their responsibility for their predicament by gazing upon the bronze serpent
- 4) Looking away from themselves, God's people came to see that God could give them a better life.
- 5) A story of a snake saving a life.
- 6) Our “salvation” is found in facing who we are and looking to the cross.
- 7) As we long for the “better life” we look to the cross to see love, hope and his salvation.

THE MESSAGE:

A young man who entered a very strict monastic order. It was so strict that members were permitted to speak only two words per year to the head abbot.

At the end of year one the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke his two words, "bad food." At the end of the second year the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke two more words, "hard bed." At the end of year three he came to the abbot and spoke his last two words, "I quit."

The abbot responded, "Well its about time. Complain, complain, complain that's all you've done since you came here."

Complain, complain, complain.” God and Moses could have said that about the Israelites. Out in the desert, with God giving them all they needed, they lost their faith and began to think only about themselves. Their fear drove them away from living in faith. And what did they do? They complained. They whined.

Even though they had plenty, they claimed they had none. Even though God was providing care, as the covenant promised, they did not see it. They were not satisfied. They wanted a better life. They wanted Moses to immediately take them to the better life.

They are a lot like ole' Bessy back on my farm in Custer County. Bessy had a great pasture. Lush grass. A full tank of fresh water. But Bessy was never satisfied. She always found ways to get through the fences to get to what she saw as "greener pastures. It looked like she had no faith in her caretakers. She could fend for herself. Finally, we took charge – after different pastures, a neck "yoke" and some electrical fences. We declared her to be unhelpful on our farm and she was sold to an unsuspecting farmer.

God took charge too. He saw the lack of faith in these people and sent snakes to get their attention. He wanted people to realize their whining, their complaining. God wanted them to see that they were not recognizing God's abundant blessing, God's faithfulness to provide all they needed, not all they wanted, but all they needed.

But then, what do they do? They complain even louder. God has to take over again and provide a means out of their complaining, the corner they've gotten themselves into. God provides a symbol which is life giving, life saving and life healing. All they have to do is lift their eyes to this symbol and they can be cured of their illness, they can be saved.

Now, let's think about this. I've said that their whining was because they turned their eyes from God. Their self-centeredness was because their focus was no longer upon the God who saved them, the God who fed them. Their dis-satisfaction was because of their lack of attention to God. In fact, sin is turning in on ourselves.

To be healed, they had to face their responsibility for their predicament by gazing upon the bronze serpent. Their salvation takes their specific action -- to look purposefully upon the snake. To be healed, they had to face their responsibility for their predicament by gazing upon the bronze serpent.

The symbol upon which they were to lift their eyes wasn't so much that they looked at it, but that they looked away from themselves. They refocused on what was important. They looked out of the rut that they were in and saw what God was doing, what God is doing and what God will do.

They realized that it was God who was taking them to a better life. That God was the one who could give them something more. They began to understand God as "salvation."

Not much has changed over the centuries. It is, for most of us, easy to complain and avert our eyes our God of abundance who gives us wondrous gifts. We have everything we need for life. And we have a whole bunch of the things we want. We are not left wanting. Yet, were pretty quick, at least I know that I am -- to rail at God. The theme of that railing, "Take me to a better life."

Take me to a better life because my inward sinful desire is to want more, to not be satisfied, to see greener grass on the other side of the fence. Then I want to do it all myself. But God says, "You're saved only by my grace, by taking your eyes off yourself and looking upon my cross. You're saved not by what you've done, or will do, or even could do, but because of the cross. Look here and live!!"

Valentin Grimaldo was walking with his brother along U.S. Highway 281 near Encino, Texas, when he reached into some tall grass. As his hand plunged into the weeds, the fangs of a deadly coral snake bit into his flesh. Lethal venom quickly flowed into his body.

Quick thinking and decisive, gritty action saved his life. A spokes person for the hospital where Mr. Grimaldo was treated said, "He grabbed the snake and bit its head off. He skinned it and used the skin as a tourniquet to keep the venom from spreading." A passerby who saw the frantic brothers stopped, put them into his car, and drove them to the hospital's emergency room. Valentin's brother kept the snake's head as a souvenir of the harrowing adventure.

This is God's truth. Salvation and healing are found in facing who we are. When we'd rather run, we are invited to stare at Jesus, hanging on the cross, the Son of Man lifted up for us. We are invited to come face to face with our sin – the sin which Jesus carried to the cross on our behalf.

"The only way to overcome the poison, to get the venom out of the ... heart is to regard the Son of man, crucified, and rejoice in the completeness of the plan of salvation."

Do you remember the "agony of defeat" failed ski jump that opened "Wide World of Sports"? The skier appeared in good form as he headed down the jump, but then, for no apparent reason, he tumbled head over heels off the side of the jump, bouncing off the supporting structure.

What most of us don't know is that he chose to fall rather than finish the jump. Why? He explained later, the jump surface had become too fast. Midway down the ramp, he realized if he completed the jump, he would land on the level ground, beyond the safe landing area, which could have been fatal. As it was, the skier suffered only a headache from the tumble.

To change one's course in life can be a dramatic and sometimes painful undertaking, but change is better than a fatal.

As humans we complain, rebel against the Kingdom of God, even longing for a "better life." Death and the pattern of sin has us on a fast track toward oblivion. However, God does an astonishing thing. He erects a cross of death that we might make a course correction to life. God erects a cross out of love to save the world, not to condemn it.

"The God of Jesus loves us beyond worthiness and unworthiness, beyond fidelity and infidelity. He loves us in the morning sun and in the evening rain. He loves us when our intellect denies it and our emotions refuse it and when our whole being reject it. God loves with out condition or reservation. God loves you at this very moment – just as you are! Not as you should be!"

As we long for the "better life" we look to the cross to see, love, hope and his salvation.

Amen.

Citations:

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"The Bronze Serpent History," T. Hoogsteen, Kerux Online Journal of Biblical Theology. <http://www.kerux.com/kerux/documents/KeruxV02N3A2.asp>

Last quote -- paraphrase a guy named Brennan Manning.