**Notes for Next Sunday**

Fourth Sunday in Lent

**The Point of this Week’s Readings**

Each of our four readings has three themes running through them. They are:

* Doing things our way will result in God’s anger playing out in our lives.
* God offers us His free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ our Savior.
* Thanksgiving is the response to God’s mercy.

The Psalm (107:1-7) deals with results of what happens when people go their own way (vv. 2-5). Verses 6-7 speak of God bringing them out of their distress when they have repented. Interestingly the thanksgiving begins at the beginning of the Psalm. There is an anticipation that as they worship they already trust God to deliver them. In fact all of the verses are an example of gratitude for what God will do for the people in the various circumstances in which they find themselves.

The Old Testament (Numbers 21:4-9) setting finds Israel not long after they have escaped slavery in Egypt. They anger God by their constant complaining about their food situation. God sends snakes and many die. This leads to their repentance. In His mercy God tells Moses to put up a pole with a snake on it. In their repentance as they look upon this bonze snake they are saved.

In the Epistle Lesson (Ephesians 2:10) Paul reminds the Ephesians that in the past they had been dead in their sins. They had no hope of salvation. The bulk of this reading is all about God acting in His grace and mercy. In fact God’s mercy even reaches into the response area (v. 10). He has not only created us, redeemed us, but also sets before us things to do for which He has given us gifts so we can accomplish them. The beauty of this is summed up in the word “workman.” The Greek word for “workman” is the same word from which we get our word “poem.” We are God’s poem.

The Gospel (John 3:14-21) is the last portion of Jesus speaking to Nicodemus. The sin in this text is the “not believing” in God’s Son whom He sent to save the world. The vast majority of the text is about what God offers through His Son. It begins with a reference to the bronze snake from the Old Testament lesson. Their looking upon the snake on the pole and believing saved the Israelites. Here it refers to Jesus being lifted up on the cross to procure our salvation. Whoever believes on the crucified Christ will be saved. The last verse in this text is like the last verse in the epistle. Both speak of showing thanks by responding in their lives.

*For more in-depth commentary on each reading, read the notes found after each text below.*

**Psalm 107:1-7**

1﻿ **Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. ﻿2﻿ Let the redeemed of the LORD say this— those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, ﻿3﻿ those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south.﻿a﻿ ﻿4﻿ Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. ﻿5﻿ They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. ﻿6﻿ Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. ﻿7﻿ He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle. ﻿8﻿ Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, ﻿9﻿ for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things. ﻿**

Israel had just returned from the Babylonian exile (v. 3). Israel is now led by a Levite in celebrating God’s unfailing compassion toward those who have cried to him in the crises of their lives.

The word “redeemed” here is used as a synonym for “delivered.” There are four examples of people redeemed from trouble: those lost in the wilderness, prisoners, the foolish, and sailors facing storms (south v. 3). All cry out to the Lord, and He delivers them. Those redeemed from trouble are encouraged to thank the Lord. In a sense, we all experience some aspect of these four perils. They probably reflect the overall danger of the captivity rather than any particular situation. (TLSB)

Verses 4-7 speak of being lost in a trackless desert. Israel had journeyed through the desert on her way to Canaan, therefore she had firsthand experience of the terrors of the desert. As she traveled she was bounded on the east by the great Arabian Desert. On her west was the Mediterranean Sea. Sea’s were thought of as scary places where all kinds of evil existed.

**Old Testament – Numbers 21:4-9**

**4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;  5 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!” 6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.  7 The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8 The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”  9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.**

They had just had a convincing victory (v. 2). They were full of themselves and forgot that God had granted them this win.

In 20:21 Edom (Esau’s descendants who were a constant enemy of Israel) denied passage through its land. Moses determined not to engage Edom in battle at this time. The detour meant that they were walking in circles. The people soon became impatient with Moses and with the direction the Lord was taking them. So they began to grumble.

They began to remember the good food they had in Egypt but they did not recall the whips and the bricks (v. 5). Once they had to slave for their daily bread, now they could pick up manna for free. But impatience has clouded their memory.

Sin brings on pain and punishment. The fiery snake bites hurt and killed (v. 6). The people got the message and repented, but not until thousands had died (v. 7)

In response to the people’s confession of sin (v. 7), God directed Moses to make an image of a snake and put it on a pole, so that anyone who had been bitten could look at it and live. This narrative also appears in John 3:14–15.

**Epistle – Ephesians 2:1-10**

**As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ﻿2﻿ in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ﻿3﻿ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature﻿a﻿ and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ﻿4﻿ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ﻿5﻿ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ﻿6﻿ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ﻿7﻿ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ﻿8﻿ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ﻿9﻿ not by works, so that no one can boast. ﻿10﻿ For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

Here Paul writes about the purpose and plan of God. The movement in this reading is from death to life.

The first three verses are a laundry list of how the Ephesians had lived in the past. These would not make them children of God but children of wrath.

In verse 1 “dead” meant spiritually dead (v. 1). “Trespass” points to making a false step so as to lose one’s footing. “Sin” implies a sin of ignorance. “Ruler of the air” (v. 2) is none other than Satan.

God’s mercy is his overflowing active compassion, freely exercised, excluding all ideas of merit on the part of the object (v. 4)

The Apostle Paul is known for his repeating a point to drive the message home. Verses 4-9 are a great example of that. In fact verses 8-9 carry an intense message of being saved by grace alone.

God has much work for us to do. Good works are a crucial aspect of the Christian life. Our good works, however, become an expression of thankfulness for all Christ has done for us, not an attempt to win heaven.

**Gospel – John 3:14-21**

**14﻿ 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.”**

This text has Jesus sharing these words with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night, most likely for fear of being seen talking with the one he calls “Rabbi.” He recognizes that Jesus is the one who has come from God because of the miraculous signs He is doing. Jesus shares with Nicodemus that he must be born again through water and the Spirit.

Jesus draws a comparison between the lifted up bronze serpent and the lifted up Son of Man. This comparison is developed throughout this reading.

The lifted-up serpent looked like a deadly snake, but was without poison. The lifted-up Son of Man looked like a sinner, but was only in the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom 8:3). Jesus was crucified as a criminal, but was without sin (Is 53:9). The lifting up of the Son refers not only to His crucifixion, but also to His resurrection and exaltation to glory in heaven.

To “believe” is the whole point of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. The Greek for “believes” means to have faith. It is found 90 times in the Gospel of John.

The promise of salvation belongs to everyone who believes. It is universal. No one who believes is excluded. It is personal. God knows our names, and each of us has eternal life.

God’s love in verse 16 is agape love. That is the kind of love that is unconditional on the part of God.

Everything hangs on faith! In fact, judgment can be said to have taken place based on the faith or lack of it in the hearers (v. 18).

Jesus gives a definition of what he means regarding judgment. The inner motive for choosing the darkness is because humankind is wicked and in need of saving. “Evil” is also translated as “worthless” (vv. 19-20)

Good works flow from a regenerated heart. The Christian is glad to have his works revealed in order that they may speak for him. They are in reality not his own . . . they are done and performed in God, who gives both to will and to do according to His good pleasure (V. 21)