

Lent 4 –3.10.24-- Pastor Anne Lohrmann

It is not hard for me to imagine the pain that God experienced watching his own son die.

We know death. We have experienced it.

We have lost friends, parents, children, unborn children.

And God so loved the world that God gave God's *only* Son – so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

That's quite a sacrifice.

We know death. Would any of us ever have *chosen* for our person or people to die, if we had the option? Of course not. But God did. Because God so loved us.

I remember being confused as a kid when I'd go to a Mariners game or something and see people holding up signs that say "John 3:16" or even some of its words. God gave the only Son so that those who believe would not perish but have eternal life. I really didn't understand what that had to do with baseball.

But now I understand it. It's a verse that some people believe is the primary reason for evangelism – for converting people. And what they're focused on is the word "if," which is not actually there in the text. Their concern, you see, is that all people be brought to belief in Jesus so that they don't burn in hell. In many ways I know these people's hearts are in the right place – they just want to save us. But I think they're missing the point. I don't think Jesus' words here have anything to do with hell, or even death, but with life.

God so loved the world that God sent the only Son *so that* those who believe in him will not perish, but have eternal life.

Let's take a look at the Hebrew Scripture lesson for today. Here we find the Israelites wandering in the desert. Remember, they left behind a terrible life of slavery and persecution. Moses has led them out of that situation in Egypt and is guiding them toward the Holy Land – the place they will finally be safe and free.

But you know... journeys are long and people are people... so of course they're grumbling. They hate the food. They're starving. They're bored. They're tired. "Why did you lead us out here to die??" They complain. "At least when we were slaves we had decent meals and a roof over our head!" People have short memories, I guess, and the grass is always greener on the other side of wherever we are.

But then some snakes arrive on the scene, which they interpret as punishment for their whining, and people begin to die from these terrible snake bites. So, God sends a solution, and a sign of

God's power. Moses is told to craft a figure of a serpent, and put it up on a large pole, and whenever someone is bitten by the snake, all they have to do is look at the figure on the pole, and they are healed. And they live.

And for a while this works really well...until the next time they get bored and hungry and tired, and start complaining again.

Fast-forward to John's Gospel, and we find Jesus referencing this Moses/serpent/pole story, but putting *himself* in the place of the serpent figure. He says *he* is going to be lifted up, and those who see him on the cross, and believe in him, will live. He's going to become the sacrifice, the healer, the Savior.

But why would God choose this? Why would God choose death and sacrifice as the means for our salvation, when God maybe could have done this another way?

As I said – we know death. We understand sacrifice – not in the literal ways our ancestors did – but we know that the way that humans behave is always in a give and take, economy-based, system. If someone is bad, they have to deal with the consequences, right? If someone sins, they need to repent and make amends and/or face a punishment for their wrong-doing.

When we feel we have done something wrong, we do all kinds of things to deal with it. We might go with denial (“I didn't hurt you! You're just too sensitive!”) or we might try blame (“I *had* to do that bad thing to you because you deserved it...or someone else made me! It's not my fault.”) We might rationalize: (“Well, this thing I did was bad, but that person did something much worse than I ever would!”)

Living in light, as Jesus talks about – in *truth* – is not comfortable for us. To expose our imperfections, our wrong-doings, our mistakes, our shortcomings, our sins – is not what we naturally want to do.

Living in the light terrifies us. We don't want people to see us that clearly. If they really knew us, what might they think? What would they say about our mistakes, our secrets, our failures, our sins? We would usually prefer to hide in a shadow than have to be fully honest – fully vulnerable – and let people judge us as we truly are. Because for people – grace is hard.

But Jesus does what we cannot do – he is lifted up – high up on a cross – for all to see in the light. Exposed. Betrayed. Hurt. Weak. Humiliated. And when we see Jesus on the cross we can all see for ourselves the very real result of the way we behave. The ways we are willing to let others suffer in order to keep our own comfort. The ways we lie and manipulate to get what we want. The ways we are willing to sacrifice the well-being of another person to protect ourselves.

Now listen, I know you. I know you are beautiful, kind, loving people.

But sin is not just doing bad, mean things that you think you'd never do.

Sin is the brokenness of human lives. Sin is anything that keeps us at an arm's length from our creator God, and from one another. It even keeps us from loving ourselves.

Remember Adam and Eve? There was a serpent in that story, too, right? The serpent tempted the people to eat a fruit that would make them as wise as God, and they wanted it. They ate it.

Immediately they learn what sin is. After they disobeyed God, they ran and hid from God. There's the first broken relationship – suddenly they fear their creator and don't want God to see them or know them at all.

They start to argue and blame one another – more brokenness.

They are ashamed of their own bodies all of a sudden – realizing they are naked and suddenly feeling vulnerable, embarrassed, exposed. Brokenness.

Sin is all of these things – the un-wholeness that we feel deep within us. We don't want God to see our secrets and know our terrible thoughts. We don't want to take responsibility for our own actions, and we point fingers and blame and scapegoat. We are unsettled in our own souls because we can't talk about our sin, and so we feel ashamed, or stupid, or hateful of our own bodies and minds.

God answers all of this sin with one little word – Jesus.

God comes to earth, because this brokenness is breaking God's own heart.

God desires for us all to live abundantly – *all*. And God sees that even with all of the laws and promises and recipes for success that God has given us, we just keep hurting ourselves and one another.

So God sends Jesus, NOT a vengeful warrior as expected -- but weak and fragile and crying – into this world. To be one of us. To know the pain we feel. To know the shame and humiliation we live with. To know the temptation to grab power and wealth. To be betrayed like we have been.

And God says *no* to our ways. Nobody needs to be sacrificed. We do not need to punish one another or ourselves for sin. We do not need retribution. We need GRACE.

Grace is the gift. And it's free. And it's *finished*. Jesus is the very last sacrifice that ever needs to happen. On the cross, God puts an end to the system of scapegoating and sacrifice. No more bird or pig or goat sacrifices. No more human sacrifices. Death is *not* what God desires.

What God *does* desire is grace. Just grace.

Grace is what God chooses to use to handle our sin and brokenness. That means that instead of punishment, God chooses forgiveness. Instead of vengeance, God chooses mercy. Instead of wrath, God chooses love.

And that grace is more powerful than death.

That grace is more powerful than sin.

By God's grace – forgiveness, mercy, love – you have been saved. Notice it does *not* say, You are saved because you have said the right prayer. Not because you have done enough good deeds. Not because you were able to wiggle out of it. Not because you've punished yourself enough. You are saved by grace. Period. Full stop.

That brokenness we live with? It hurts. It hurts every single day, doesn't it? It hurts when someone is unkind to us or unwilling to see the good in us. It hurts when our good intentions are misunderstood. It hurts when we stare in the mirror and see only ugly and imperfect. It hurts when we try to be perfect only to be confronted with our humanness and weakness over and over again. It hurts when we try to grab power and money and glory and find that it doesn't ever satisfy us, and only harms others.

There's grace for all of this pain. And grace is a balm. It is a healing ointment. It is a superpower that we have to offer one another, and apply generously to ourselves.

God so loves you, that God sent Jesus to announce to you today, and every day, that there is grace for you. Yes, you. No matter what you've done. No matter what you haven't done.

But why death? Why the cross? Why did it have to happen this way? I mean, as we heard last week, the cross is foolishness. Of course it is! Why is death God's answer to sin, we might ask? Well, actually, death is *not* God's answer. Resurrection is!

And for each and every one of us – and everyone else out there – *that* is what God desires.

Resurrection. New life. Fresh starts. Every single day we can receive grace again, no matter what happened yesterday.

So go ahead, make the sign of the cross on your forehead, the sign marked on you in your baptism. Do it every single day. Do it every time you feel your brokenness overwhelming you. Feel the relief of that healing balm. And know that grace is enough. It is enough.

Amen.