

Lent 4B

Message: Our Serpent of Salvationⁱ

In John's gospel, Jesus asks his disciples not to take "offense" at him for his teaching, and it is not uncommon for preachers even today to allude to the gospel of Jesus Christ as being "offensive". In the lessons for today, we get a glimpse of what it is that is so offensive about Jesus.

The Children of Israel are only a few months out of Egypt and they are grumbling...again! No longer content with the manna God provided for them, they long for a romanticized memory of Egypt, conveniently forgetting the slavery that accompanied it!

Our English translations of the text from Numbers tells us that as punishment, God sent fiery, poisonous serpents into their midst. As a result, many of the people died, and is not infrequently the case, the sudden increase in the mortality rate drove the people to God in repentance. They run to Moses and beg him to pray to the Lord that he would take the serpents away from them.

That would seem like the rational remedy but notice what God does instead. He instructs Moses to fabricate a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. The instructions given to the people are that if anyone is bitten, he should look at the bronze serpent lifted up on the pole and live. The people are not given a voice in how their prayers will be answered or their salvation mediated! They don't get to vote on it!

And the offense begins! Martin Luther speculates that the Children of Israel are offended first of all by having to look upon the object of their fear. Luther imagines them saying, "We are so terrified that we cannot stand the sight of them!" And, as we are so often want to do, they come up with their preferred remedy of relief from the fiery fiends: "If you would, instead, give us a drink, a cooling plaster, a cooling drink, to take away the venom and the fever." ⁱⁱ

Luther then gives voice to the deeper, underlying objection as he imagines the people, scoffingly saying, "How can that dead and lifeless object up there benefit us?" It makes no sense! That won't do any good! God, let us tell you what you ought to do instead!

When Jesus draws the clear, direct connection between himself and the bronze serpent, he was doing more than just remarking on the similarity of the physical action of being lifted up on a pole. As our understanding

increases, so does our offense. We who want to be free from torment, suffering, and eternal punishment see just that happening to Christ on the cross. We would have our salvation come in a way that makes sense to us and at least allows us the dignity of being involved, of contributing some small token expenditure of energy and will.

The notion that Jesus saves us by taking on human nature, that he suffered so because God willed that he be victim, reconciliation, ransom, redemption and the price of sin, that by taking on the chastisement due us upon himself, Christ becomes the refuse of the world and the off scouring of all – this is offensive. Our levels of offense have been detailed most succinctly by the medieval French scholastic philosopher, Peter Abelard. Such an offensive substitutionary view of Christ Jesus' work on the cross is rejected on six counts:

1. The idea that the Bible shows that God is able to forgive without an authorizing sacrifice;
2. The wickedness of the crucifixion only adds to our sinfulness rather than saving us from it;
3. Jesus' innocent death is too horrible to please God even for some lofty ulterior purpose;
4. The crucifixion is unable to make people any better and so cannot save them;
5. God could not be satisfied by paying off a debt on his own that he himself did not run up in the first place;
6. An innocent death has no intrinsic properties for saving sinners from everlasting damnation.

All of this is to object on the familiar grounds that It makes no sense! It won't do any good! God, let us tell you what you ought to do instead!

But that is what happens when we approach the work of Christ with human understanding, when we attempt to see without the eyes of faith! God's Word clearly demonstrates that 1) all forgiveness is predicated on the divine sacrifice either in fact or as a promise – much in the way the promise of the Messiah saved those who believed in him long before his actual event; 2) the evil in the crucifixion is confined by design to exposing sin, not making it worse; 3) God does not delight in Jesus' suffering but only in his obedience to the point of death on the cross; 4) the primary goal of the crucifixion is to snatch us from the jaws of hell, not make us morally perfect. Whatever perfection we have is not intrinsic but borrowed from Jesus; 5) God is satisfied because whatever his Son does delights him, in whatever circumstance it may occur; 6) the magnitude of Jesus' unique suffering is deemed sufficient by God himself to surmount the defamation of his holiness and the provocation of his wrath.

But perhaps most importantly, as Luther points out, to criticize God's plan of salvation, be it by a serpent on a pole or the Son of Man on a pole is no different than asking, "What can the water, the wine, and the bread achieve?" But it is characteristic of our God to perform great things through insignificant, humble, and odd means.

Faith probably seems insignificant to many people. "Faith?" they say. "What does faith amount to? That's not enough! You must also perform some good work: fast, pray, make a decision!" All this has such a semblance of piety that people are led to believe faith is such a simple and plain thing – you must also do some good work!"

When we fall into beliefs like this, like our ancestors in the faith before us, we stamp our feet and declare in our most offended voice, "I'm not going to just look at that Snake on the Stick! I'm going to do something about it!"

If the church is to overcome the good feelings and the "easy-to-digest spirituality" that is dragging it down, it needs the strength that comes from believing in the horrible sacrifice of the Lamb of God who is brutalized like the poisonous snake long ago in the wilderness. We need the offense of the healing snake, but not without the blood of the Lamb in, with, and under it.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Our Serpent of Salvation: The Offense of Jesus in John's Gospel, Ronald F. Marshall, Word and World, Volume XXI, Number 4, Fall, 2001

ⁱⁱ *Sermons on the Gospel of John*, Martin Luther, American Edition, pp. 338-339