

MARCH 22, 2009
LENT 4
“JUST TRUST”

Let us pray: Healer of our every ill, give us the courage to look upon your cross as the source of our healing and the promise of our salvation. It is in Jesus’ name, the once-crucified, now-risen one that I pray. Amen.

Today, more than half-way through Lent, we hear the words of John 3:16, you know, the sign that someone always seems to hold up within camera range at the NCAA basketball tournament or in the end-zone of the Super Bowl, or maybe you saw “John 3:16” carefully outlined in black grease under the eyelids of Florida’s talented (and evangelical) quarterback Tim Tebow in last January’s BCS championship game--words that indeed do seem such a beautiful condensation of the Gospel in condensed, almost epigrammatic, form. It was brother Martin Luther himself who once called John 3:16 “**the Gospel in miniature.**” In the words of the old RSV Bible, the translation I grew up with and learned by heart: “*For God so loved the world*

that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Our three-year lectionary does us the favor of putting this Gospel “nugget” into the larger context of both John’s Gospel and the Hebrew scripture text from the Book of Numbers which Jesus cites in connection with it—a curious story dating from Israel’s 40 years of wilderness wandering. Jesus’ words of introduction are these: *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”* The story in Numbers, to which Jesus refers, is itself quite a curiosity, a story that anthropologists might well call an instance of “sympathetic magic.”

The story begins familiarly enough with the Israelites complaining as became their habit in the wilderness, grumbling about God to Moses, asking one of those famously “complex” questions we learned about in logic class, akin to the classic “when did you stop kicking your dog?” to which there is no good answer. *“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”* the people whined to Moses, complaining explicitly about how

they detested “*this miserable food*” by which presumably they meant the “*bread from heaven,*” which they had funnily enough nicknamed “*manna,*” a Hebrew word literally meaning “**What’s it?**” What is this stuff—this “mystery meat” as we used to call it in college-- that God has given us that covers the ground each morning, which, as the story goes, cannot be hoarded. Why couldn’t it be hoarded? Yep, because it would get maggots if more was taken than needed for the daily ration, except on Fridays, because God would give a two-day supply only over the Sabbath.

But even the miraculous manna in the wilderness was getting to be old hat for these galloping gourmets whose mouths began watering in memory of the flesh pots of Egypt and the garlic and leeks that spiced their food, conveniently forgetting that, oh yes, they also had been **slaves** in Egypt. Now we don’t know exactly what this manna, this “what’s it” really was, but I imagine it to be something like that tasteless tofu that I keep finding in our refrigerator, which I don’t think I could take for more than a day or two much less years and years of it. But God doesn’t suffer ungrateful gourmets any more gladly

than fools of other sorts and so, Numbers tells us bluntly, “*Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.*” We’re not told that God got mad—any more than we were told Jesus got mad at the money-changers in the temple last week—or even that God finally had it with the Israelites continual griping—only that God sent snakes which at least appears to have served to get the Israelites’ minds off their stomachs. For now they really had something to complain about and so they came to Moses begging: “*We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.*”

So Moses did just that. He prayed on behalf of his repentant people, and the Lord answered Moses’ prayer with this peculiar response: “*Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it—and live.*” So Moses did as he was told, Numbers says. He “*made a serpent of bronze, and put it on a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live!*—a kind of

ironic reversal, I always think, of the earlier episode in Exodus of the golden calf.

This, of all possible stories—the story of the snake-on-a-stick, as I like to call it, found in the sacred scriptures of his people, this very peculiar story, St. John tells us, is the story that came to Jesus’ mind, triggering his most well-known and best-loved articulation of the Gospel of God’s love for the world—a love so deep, so profound, so long-suffering, that Jesus could even imagine himself in the place of the snake on a stick, lifted high that all might look on him in their desperation and instead of perishing from the poison of their sin, be healed and, what’s more, inoculated for eternal life.

The peculiar theological genius that lies embedded in this story, of course, is the truth that God is sufficiently creative as to turn the very source of his people’s dying—the poisonous snakes—into the very thing that would become the source of their healing—their salvation. And, so of course, with the cross of Jesus. Just as for the Israelites it must have been a loathsome thing for them to hear that a snake on a stick would be their antidote from death—their looking upon the very thing that threatened to kill

them, would be the source of their healing and salvation-- so too, but much more profoundly, only by clinging in trust to the crucified Jesus as the antidote to sin, death and the devil, only looking in faith on the dying form of God crucified for us—hence the crucifix as a kind of amulet-- are we able to be saved and reconciled to God and one another.

Just as I said last week, our current global economic crisis is at its heart a crisis of confidence in our financial institutions, caused by the untrustworthy actions not only of outrageous scoundrels like Bernard Madoff but all those who allowed their own pursuit of wealth and the security they assumed would accompany it to blind them not only to the inequities of our economic system but indeed to the risks and irrationalities of the “house of cards” that our financial system had been allowed and even encouraged to become. As I quoted Martin Marty as having observed back before Christmas, our world is coming to see that “dealing with trust is not only relevant; it is desperately crucial.”

Trust is, of course, what Christian faith is all about, trusting in God’s promises, what we have

come to call this Lent God’s “covenant.” But one of the implications of entrusting ourselves to God in faith is, as our recently released ELCA Sexuality Statement entitled, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” claims—note the word “trust” in the subtitle—is that we are called in our everyday lives “to make this world a more trustworthy place.” “Trust,” the statement claims, “is a critical element that holds together couples and relationships, households and families, social structures and institutions.” “We normally,” the statement goes on to explain, “relate concepts of trust, promise, loyalty, and reliance to individual relationships.” But these concepts “also describe economic life, political arrangements, social policies, and social structures” including, of course, not only sexual relationships—the focus of this statement—but also our life together in the church.

Trust-building is an central way of understanding our call to love our neighbor as ourself—a love, of course, that is rooted in our response to the first and greatest commandment, to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. The difficulty, of course, is that we live in a sinful world where trust is too often betrayed,

where promises are broken and faith is shattered. The problem is that institutions and people do not always prove “trustworthy” as we’ve all too recently experienced—and trust can really only be won from us, not coerced from us or even chosen by us as some sort of act of the will.

Trust, in images I’ve used before, is like a little child, take Xavier for example, entrusted by Ed and Joey into the care of a new nursery attendant—Robin—whom Xavier has learned to trust as Robin has spoken kindly to him and held him and drawn pictures with him—in short, demonstrating to Xavier her good intentions toward him—and that she is to be trusted—she is trustworthy—and so he has learned to “entrust” himself to her.

Another image I like is that of how little children learning to swim must first learn to “trust” the buoyancy of the water—and how this takes the patience and kindness and gentleness a good teacher who will cradle the child in the cold, threatening water, carefully letting the child know he won’t be allowed to drown, until the child learns to trust the buoyancy of the water and learns to float on his own.

These, of course, are merely human metaphors but they help us to appreciate what Martin Luther always emphasized as the “trust” character of faith—the same word translated as “believe” in John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes—trusts—in him—entrusts oneself to Jesus—may not perish but have eternal life. Believing in this sense isn’t a matter of having the right ideas about Jesus, or giving intellectual assent to twenty impossible things before breakfast. It isn’t “deciding” something, as though we can simply “decide” to trust—even “decide” to give our lives to Jesus. No it’s a deeper matter than that. God has to “win” our trust from us—like a nursery attendant or a swimming instructor. As wise old St. Paul put it in language especially dear to our Lutheran ears, “*For by grace you have been saved **through faith** and this is **not** your own doing.*” May I repeat that? “*and this is **not** your own doing—it is the **gift of God**—not the result of works so that no one may boast.*”

So what of our works—our Christian calling to love our neighbor and make our world a more “trustworthy” place. In Paul’s own concluding

words, *“For we are what he (God) has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”*

Trust and trust-building is both God’s gift and our calling into life—it is God’s covenant—God’s “way of life” bequeathed us in baptism.

The peace that passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.