

Lent 4B: John 3:15, Saved by that which killed

1. With the vaccine rollout that's been happening over the past several months I know that we're all hoping to return to some sense of normalcy – restaurants and stores reopened, no masking, etc.
 - a. All of this is due to the incredible work of scientists and clinicians who have developed these vaccines in record time to combat a virus that has brought the world to a grinding halt, but we may have forgotten we've been here before.
 - i. In the summers leading up to 1955 America was plagued by another recurring virus that came every year and left kids crippled in its wake – polio.
 - ii. Perhaps some of you had family or friends that were affected.
 - iii. People were terrified, there were quarantines, travel and activity were restricted.
 - b. At that time Jonas Salk was a young physician and researcher on staff at the University of Pittsburgh whose work focused on virology, especially polio
 - i. Salk had an idea from his previous work with influenza, take a preparation of “killed virus” that hopefully can't infect and use it to stimulate the body to develop immunity to the live virus
 - ii. Who would volunteer for the first shot? You hope that it would work, but what if you're wrong and you get the disease?
 - iii. In 1952 feeling confident about his work he injected himself, volunteers in his lab, and his family to see if it worked
 - iv. And it was a great success, and approved for public use in April of 1955
 - c. This achievement was a pioneering development in the study of immunology, using the organism that's killing us to prevent disease
 - i. We've come a long way from those early vaccines, but our vaccines still work by using parts of the virus to sensitize our immune systems so that we can fight off a real infection if exposed.
 - ii. This takes the saying, “What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger,” to an entirely different level
 - iii. How amazing that the virus itself was the key our deliverance, saved by what used to kill us.
2. We note in our lesson this morning that the Lord works in a similar fashion: both with the serpent on the pole in Numbers and our Lord on the cross – God saves by what used to kill.
 - a. In our OT lesson the children of Israel are approaching the Promised Land after the desert wandering for 40 years, Miriam and Aaron had died, along with the first generation of those who came out of Egypt
 - i. And now the second generation became impatient as our lesson records
 - ii. And what do they do? Just like their parents before they complain.

- iii. And the Lord responds as He had with the parents' generation – He punishes them for their hardness of heart this time by sending “fiery serpents”
 - b. The bite of the serpent was universally fatal so when the people realized their sin and their danger they cry out in fear and ask Moses to pray for them.
 - i. But the plague doesn't stop just because they repent, our Lord gives a sign that can only be fully appreciated in light of the cross
 - ii. Moses is told, **“Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.”** (Num 21:8)
 - iii. An image of the thing that was sent to kill the children of Israel was put on a pole – the destroyer had been destroyed.
 - iv. So, the children of Israel looked in faith upon the bronze serpent, saved by the image of the things that killed them
 - c. Like so many of the events in the OT this episode is given its full meaning in the New Testament
 - i. In our Gospel lesson our Lord speaks with Nicodemus the Pharisee who comes to Him by night to ask some questions
 - ii. And our Lord references this event in Numbers and shows that it was all about the deliverance that He would bring, **“And 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.”**
 - iii. Just as the children of Israel looked in faith to the bronze serpent and were healed, Jesus became that which afflicted us (sin) so that we could be saved from its effect, eternal death.
- 3. Jonas Salk took the polio virus and used that biological curse to deliver millions of children and parents from the fear of disease, but God does more
 - a. God took His Son and made Him to be the curse that kills us – sin, so that through Him we would be healed.
 - i. Our Epistle lesson reminds us about our natural state, and in that state we were as hopeless as the Israelites who had been bitten by the serpent, **And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.** (Eph 2:1-3)
 - ii. Our plight like the Israelites who were bitten, universally fatal – we are all sinful, we are all by nature children of wrath incapable of saving ourselves
 - b. But Paul then gives us the Good News, **But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our**

trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, (Eph 2:4-6)

- i. He did this in the same way He saved the Israelites in our OT lesson as Paul tells us in Col, **“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us...This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”** (Col 2:14)
- ii. What was nailed to the cross? Jesus who became sin for our sake as God’s Word tells us in II Cor 5, **“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** (2Co 5:21).
- iii. Just as Moses placed the serpent, the very thing that killed the Israelites on the pole, God placed our sin on Jesus on the cross disarming its power!
- c. But whereas our vaccines can only prevent disease (it doesn’t help those with the disease) God’s remedy is better
 - i. It takes those who are infected with sin (you, me, the world) and cures them all, 100% success rate, no failure – all sin has been forgiven in the Son
 - ii. For those who look with faith upon the real serpent on the pole (Jesus), we see that our curse (sin) is overcome, and we are healed
 - iii. As our Lord says to Nicodemus in the best-known verse of the Bible, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** (Joh 3:16)
- d. And as people who have seen the crucified Lord, who have gazed on their cure we now point other sin-stricken people to the cross where they can be healed
 - i. Wouldn’t that be the natural response today if you received a fail-safe cure for Covid?
 - ii. You’d tell the whole world where they could be healed, too.
 - iii. That’s what we have in the Gospel of Christ, the one and only miraculous cure for the disease that will otherwise invariably bring death
 - iv. We have the only invitation that can bring life, **“Come to the church, the hospital where you can receive the medicine of immortality, be washed in the blood of the lamb, saved by the One who became what would have killed you that you may be healed!”**