

SERMON TEXT FOR LENT 4B

PREACHED MARCH 11, 2018 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: John 3.14-21; Numbers 21.4-9; Ephesians 2.1-10; Psalm 107.1-3, 17-22

Is God primarily a God of love or justice? Today's scripture passages bring this question to the fore, and it will take some wrestling to come up with a conclusion. However, I think the answer to the question, Is God primarily a God of love or justice?, is YES.

In the Old Testament lesson, we learn that God is so sick of the Israelites complaining about their plight in the wilderness that God sends poisonous serpents among the people. The people are bitten by the serpents and die. Wisely recognizing the reason for the snakes in their midst (plus the fact that they are in the desert, where snakes abound), they go to Moses and repent, asking Moses to ask God to take away the serpents. Moses does as they ask; he prays for the people, and God responds with an anecdote. God doesn't remove the snakes altogether, but provides a way for them to live. But the anecdote includes a reminder of the cause of their distress.

As my preaching colleagues and I wrestled with these texts earlier this week, I spoke about the perception of God in the Old Testament as a God of judgment. Well, my colleagues politely but firmly suggested that God can be seen as a God of judgment in both the Old and New Testaments.

Now, this is not the way that I normally view God. And although I'm still not completely convinced that God is a God of judgment and punishment, it is relevant to point out that, like many things in life, there's not just one side to God. As these scriptures point out, our God is BOTH a God of justice (judgment) AND a God of love. And we know this because of what we read in our gospel lesson today.

As Jesus continues his conversation with the inquisitive, would-be disciple Nicodemus, Jesus quotes scripture about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and compares it to the Son of Man being lifted up, "*that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*" Jesus then continues with the beautiful verses about God's love, and then we get to verse 19 concerning God's judgment.

But notice the character of this judgment: it is entirely passive. God does not cause the judgement; rather, those who choose to live in darkness create the judgment themselves in their failure to live rightly. And what is the judgment, the punishment exactly? It is none other than separation from God.

The word translated here as "judgment" refers less to some kind of punishment than it does a separating and revealing. Those who believe that God is love are saved; they look to the One lifted up for healing. Those who cannot imagine that God comes bringing love rather than punishment are lost - lost to their despair, sin, and confusion. And because of their own actions, or inaction, they become separated from God.

But does God let this stand? Absolutely not. "*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*"

How, then, does God deal with sin? Does God demand punishment (whether of us or Jesus) for sin, or does God forgive sin? The epistle letter to the Ephesians offers a clear

picture for us: *"But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through 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, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."*

God has never been content to act simply in judgment. God has never desired our destruction. God has always sought reform and renewal and reconciliation of God's people. God is not primarily interested in punishing and destroying sinners. God's primary concern is that sinners are saved and that we have an ongoing relationship with God.

But salvation doesn't simply mean rescue from destruction or punishment. It means a new life of fellowship with God, a life in which we are eager and willing to do God's will. It means acknowledging our sin before God and giving thanks for the many blessings God has bestowed on us. It means loving God who first loved us with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

What do we learn from these texts in response to our question? What we learn, it seems to me, is that God is both a God of judgment and a God of love. Even in our worst failures and disappointments, God loves us. God doesn't remove the sources of our suffering, but God makes the journey with us, providing what we most deeply need. And God will never, ever, stop loving us and seeking to bring us ever closer.

Sometimes knowing that we are loved unconditionally can make a difference in our lives. In one *Peanuts* comic strip, Charles Schulz conveyed through Charlie Brown the need we have to be loved, and through Lucy the inability to love one another. Charlie Brown and Lucy are leaning over the proverbial fence speaking to one another:

CB: All it would take to make me happy is to have someone say he *likes* me.

Lucy: Are you sure?

CB: Of *course* I'm sure!

Lucy: You mean you'd be happy if someone merely said he or she likes you? Do you mean that someone has it within his or her power to make you happy merely by doing such a simple thing?

CB: Yes! That's *exactly* what I mean!

Lucy: Well, I don't think that's asking too much... I really don't... But you're *sure* now? All you want is to have someone say, "I like you, Charlie Brown," and then you'll be happy?

CB: Then I'll be happy!

Lucy: [Lucy turns and walks away saying] I can't do it!

What Lucy cannot do, sinful as she is, God does. What Charlie Brown needs, lost and alone as he is, God supplies. God loves us and tells us that today clearly through John's words: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* Thanks be to God!