

Texts: John 3:14-21
Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year B
11 March 2018
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In our First Reading, both the justice of God and the mercy of God have a meeting. God in his justice punished the Israelites by having them conquered by the empire of the Chaldeans and carried off as slaves to the city of Babylon, and for the house of worship they had built for him in Jerusalem - the Temple - to be burnt to the ground and everything in it to be destroyed. God allowed this because the Israelites had turned against the Lord and had abandoned worshipping him until, the Bible says, “until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed that there *was* no remedy.” God *had* to send punishment on his chosen people because there was nothing else that would satisfy the demands and price of justice, and God could no longer overlook their sins. The price of justice was seventy years of slavery in the city of Babylon because it would take seventy years of Sabbath days that had not been kept, seventy years of the day set aside to worship the Lord that had been ignored, to purify the land of Israel so that God’s chosen people could return. That was the judgment and justice of God. But it was the same God, the Lord, who in his love and mercy, then allowed King Cyrus of the Persians to have victory over the Babylonians. It was the same God who had made his people the Israelites pay the punishment that justice demanded who then used King Cyrus to send the Israelites back home to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, the house of the true God.

In the Gospel, the justice and mercy of God also meet - they meet on the cross of Jesus. Today’s Gospel has the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” God so loved the world that he gave his only Son Jesus to die in our place, so that we are not condemned to eternal death but have eternal life. But that eternal life is only ours as the result of *someone else* paying the price justice demands for our sins and settling *our* debts. God can’t overlook the consequences of sin and the price of justice that requires the penalties of sin to be paid by someone. So God takes our judgment on Himself in Jesus and on our behalf God pays the debts we owe to justice because of our sins.

That verse John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" - only makes sense together with the two verses that come before it, John 3:14-15 that we also read today. Jesus says there: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." What is Jesus talking about when he says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up"? Think back to the stories of the Old Testament of the Israelites being freed from slavery in Egypt by God working through Moses. The Israelites, the Jews, having been set free from their slavery to the Egyptians, were marching across the Sinai Desert, led by Moses, on their way back to the land God had promised them. On that trek, they grew impatient. They complained against the Lord and their leader Moses. In punishment for their unjust complaining - the Lord and Moses had set them free after all - the Lord sends poisonous serpents among the Israelites. The serpents bite them and the Israelites are dying. The Israelites come to Moses and admit, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents." Moses prays, and the Lord tells Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live." (Numbers 21:8-9)

The serpents are God's justice, God's judgment upon His people for their turning away from Him: the serpents are the Lord's judgment on them for their sins. That they die from those serpent bites is a symbol that it is their sins that are dealing death to them and killing them. God's solution is to have Moses take the very thing that is killing them, the very thing that is the sign of God's judgment upon them for their sins, namely a poisonous serpent (but this one made of bronze) and to lift up this image of God's judgment and justice on top of a pole, so that everyone can look upon the demands of God's judgment and justice, visualized in that bronze serpent lifted up on a pole. But also so that there, in that bronze serpent lifted up on a pole by Moses they can see not only the sign of God's judgment and justice upon them, but also at the very same time the means God has given them to be rescued from the consequences of their sins. That serpent lifted up on a pole by Moses is both the sign of God acting in justice by passing judgment on the

Israelites, and also the sign of God acting in love by providing the way for the demands of justice to be met in some other way than by the deaths of the Israelites.

Centuries later, Jesus takes the story of Moses and the bronze serpent, and everything that story says about God's love and God's justice coming together in the same place, and Jesus applies it to himself. Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus is talking about of his own death on a cross. Jesus lifted up on the cross, like the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole by Moses, is the sign of the justice of God. Jesus' cross is the visual sign that God's judgment has fallen upon a world that has rejected God - and Jesus explicitly says a few verses later that his own rejection by men and women is God's judgment on the world, because we try to shove God out of our lives, out of our world, and onto that cross. At the same time, Jesus lifted up on the cross, like the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole by Moses, is also the sign of the love of God, because this is the way God has provided for the demands of His justice to be met. Anyone who looked upon the bronze serpent lived. Anyone who looks upon the crucified Jesus, anyone who looks to the cross of Jesus, that place where God's justice and God's mercy intersect, and believes, *that* person will live forever. Because it was the God of justice who *also* so loved the world that He sent his only Son. On the cross of Jesus, the justice of God and the love of God meet and kiss - and we are saved, because Jesus has paid our debts we owed to God's justice.

After my best friend died, I received a bill addressed to him in care of me. The bill was from a court in Arizona; it was a bill for the court costs of a misdemeanor trial in which my friend had been the defendant. If he were alive, he would have been responsible for the costs of justice. As it was, I wrote on the bill, "Dead", and returned it to the court, because the person who incurred those penalties and against whom judgment had been rendered was no longer alive in this world. In the same way, ultimately there can be no penalties of sin or condemnation against us, because those sinful persons we were are dead - put to death on the cross with Jesus, to set us free. Even though we still live physically in the world, spiritually we are dead to this world and our lives are with Jesus in heaven. When we pray, even just the groan "Lord, help me"; when we absent-mindedly sprinkle ourselves with holy water on our way into church; when we come forward to receive Jesus in the Eucharist - the individual against whom the bill of penalties existed is being put

to death with Jesus on the cross, and we are being born again as new person against whom there is no bill of penalties, and this happens over and over again until we are seated at last at the marriage supper of the Jesus, the Lamb of God, in heaven. It is no longer we who live in this world, but Christ who lives in us, for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son to be lifted up on the cross, like the serpent in the desert, so that all who believe in him might not perish, but have eternal life.