

**Salvation**  
**March 3, 2024**

**Our Savior is Way Lutheran Church**

**Pastor John Scott**

We are continuing our sermon series called *Christ For You*. This Lent, this season of reflection, of penitence, of thinking about the ways that God has been active in our lives, the message that I want you to know and to take with you each and every day is that *Christ is for you*.

Christ is for you. How do we see this in our scripture reading today? How do we understand how scripture speaks about this everywhere? It is through these two lenses called Law and Gospel, that God uses both to accomplish His purpose to bring us back to Himself. The law shows us our sins; the gospel shows us our Savior. And when they work together, they help us understand life. They help us understand what is going on in between our ears, and sometimes even, every once in a while, in between the ears of other people, which is always the most difficult thing. Law and Gospel. The way we understand how God is working to bring us back to Himself.

And so, we have this strange lesson from the Old Testament. Are you familiar with this? If you are part of any kind of medical community, you will notice that one of the symbols of the medical community is the cross with the snake going all around it. If you have not noticed that before, you will start seeing it now after today. But it all comes from this lesson how the people of God spent their time complaining, and through Law and Gospel, they were shown exactly who God was, who He always had been, and who He always had been for them. So, we see this strange episode of the people complaining how they say, “God, if you just had not brought us out of the land of Egypt, if you just had not taken us out of there, then we would be okay. We’d be safe, we’d have food to eat, but now, we have no food, we have no water. We have no direction. We have no purpose.

We are just wandering here in the wilderness. Lord, you brought us out into the desert to die.”

Now, where does this story take place? In our readings, we always get a little snippet of the story of the people of God. This takes place after the time when the Lord parted the Red Sea just like in the middle of these aisles here. He parted the Red Sea so that His people could walk safely through it to the other side to escape slavery—not just slavery physically, but also spiritually—to know that He was their God, that He could do anything, that in fact that He would do everything that He said He would do.

This was the God who had given them so many promises that when they were out in the wilderness, when they had escaped their captors, when they were hungry, He provided them with food, with manna. When they were thirsty, He provided them with water. When they did not know where to go, He provided them with direction at every step along the way. God provided for them.

And yet, we get to this point where the people have turned so far inward that they cannot remember these things anymore. Or if they remember them, they have reconstrued them. They have thought of them differently. No longer is God the one who has saved them, but He is the one who is brought them into their present predicament, which is uncomfortable, which brings pain and sores. They have not walked this long in the desert in a long time.

It is not easy being the people of God. But that is not the calling, is it? That is not the calling. That is not what He said. That is not what God has always promised us. That life would be perfect. That life would be easy. That life would be something that would go from one type of comfort to another. The people became impatient along the way.

And their focus was shifted from these incredible things that God had done for them—how He was present with them, how He saved them, how He loved them—to my feet hurt; the food is no good; I do not know where God is; I cannot see Him; I do not understand what is happening to me now; my family is complaining at me, how do I help them? All of the things that were happening to them in these moments they focused on. And their expectations changed. Their impatience grew because of this shift of focus. They started to even doubt that God was who He says He is. They doubted that He was the person who did all these great things for them. They doubted His promise to bring them into a promised land, to take them out of slavery, and to bring them into this beautiful land flowing with milk and honey, this land that had been promised to them because of God's great goodness, because of what He would do for them.

And so, they complained. And they grumbled. And their hearts—instead of being filled with joy, with gratitude, with the stories of God's great love and accomplishments for them—it was covered over with all these other things. It was covered over with discontent, with complaint, with impatience, with gossip. So much so that by the time we get to today's reading, the people start their complaint to God, "You are not who you said you would be."

That is a hard place to get to. Maybe you have been in that place in your life. When in times of real, not just discomfort, I do not want to make that sound, I mean that sound, that does not sound difficult enough. In times of great suffering, you may have cried out like the Israelites, "God, where are you? God, what are you doing in this moment? Why am I going through this? What is happening here? Where are you?"

And in these moments, we are tempted to think that God is not there. Not there at all. That He is not who He said He would be. That He is not the one who was promised to always work for you, to always be for you, to bring you His love and His grace each and every day. In this Old

Testament episode with the Israelites, we see that once they let this impatience, this discontent fester over into the darkness of this cry, “Lord, you are not who you say you are. God, you are not who the people have told me that you are,” things start to happen that are not great. Darkness covers over their hearts, and it starts flowing out of their mouths, and the things that they say, and the way that they are influencing the people around them, and the way that they are talking about God to their families.

And the darkness is there. Just like the cloud that people would see when the presence of God would come upon the mountain. They knew that He was there and present with them. This is a different kind of cloud. This cloud of darkness covers over our hearts and our eyes, and it helps us to not see the God who truly is for us, and loves us, that covers over his goodness.

And the dangerous part is when this darkness covers us over so much that it starts to influence how we act, how we speak, which then when we hear ourselves doing this, it is a whole feedback loop of, well yeah, well then this is what I believe, this is what God must be. And in those moments, in those moments, we feel really far from God.

Is God still there for you? Is He still present? And this is where in the story we see that in the midst of all of this complaining, in the midst of all of this darkness, God did not abandon His people, that He was still there. In the midst of the suffering that they were going to experience through these snakes, God’s next move is a move of Grace. God’s next move is, in the middle of their darkness, in the midst of the complaining, in the midst of the discomfort, in the midst of the suffering, to show up and give them a way out, to hold up that pole upon which everyone could look and to save them. You see, the people were getting bitten by these snakes. Some were dying. It was all around. It was this huge problem. But yet the Lord provided simply a way to trust in Him—to see that promise, to recapture the goodness of who God is and His promise for them—just look upon it.

It does not do anything. It is not “Change your life, and then everything will be okay.” It simply takes your focus off of that darkness and onto the light, to see this light again, see this goodness that I give to you and you will be saved.

What would you do? What would you do in this moment? Would you look and be saved or would you continue in the complaints? Would you continue in the impatience? Would you continue in the life is hard? What would you do? God’s move in all of this is always to give grace to His people. Just like this law and gospel movement law shows us our sin.

Yes, we are aware of our sin. We are aware of the darkness that covers our hearts. We are aware, aware of the way that we complain, the way that we are impatient, and the way that we suffer because yes, we are aware of that. We know this, and in the midst of that, God comes to us and gives us His grace and says, “There is light. Here I am. The light here. In fact, look to me. Look upon me, and you will see this light. And you will see my goodness, and you can be taken out and healed of that suffering and of that darkness.”

You know John 3:16: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. So the verses before that go directly back to this story about God lifting up this pole so that when people would look at it, they would know that He is the Lord, the one who makes good on His promises, and so, that they would be saved. That is the context in which we hear Jesus say these words to Nicodemus. It is about how in the midst of everything that is going on, in the midst of all the darkness that covers not just your own heart but the whole world, which is often a lot easier to see, God comes to us in the middle of that and gives us grace.

He provides the light that cuts through the darkness. And Jesus calls us to see Him as the one who brings that light. He says, “Look to me, I will be

raised upon a wooden pole as well. Look to me when I'm there. See my death for you. See my suffering for you. See all this on behalf of you. Because I love you. Because you belong to God who created you. And you are His masterpieces. And He wants you to be connected with Him again. And so I will go to the cross and be lifted up for you. So that you will be connected with the Father.”

The law and the gospel—the law shows us our sin, and the gospel shows us our Savior. And in these stories of wooden poles being made and lifted high, we see both our sin and our Savior. We see God who shows up in the midst of everything that is going on and gives us the light of His salvation for us to focus on yet again. When we start to stray, when we start to feel that darkness covering over our intentions, our desires, our actions, again, He calls us to see Jesus, to see that in Him, there is life. In Him, there is the connection with God. And this is all given to you by His grace. This key verse reminds us of exactly who God is. That God is for us. That He is not against us. That He has called us into this time and this place among these people for a reason. Not so that we would avoid all suffering, that is not the promise. But the promise is that in the midst of everything happening, He will be here. And when He is here, and His light is here, and you see Him clearly. He is for you. He is for you.

This week, I hope that you can take that into all the things that are going to happen, some of which are going to be amazing, and some of which are not going to be so amazing. Take this knowledge that does not just live in your head, but in your heart, that Christ is for you, and live that out. See His light in the midst of darkness, and then see how He uses you to be Jesus for the people around you. We say that all the time here. Be Jesus for the people around you. What does that mean? It means that when there is darkness, who brings the light for others to see? That is you. That is the people of God in this world where you are shining the light of Jesus so that others can see that Christ is for them as well. It is an incredible gift

that we have been given. Not just our reconnection with God as individuals, but in our calling to be people who get to proclaim this to the world, that Christ is for you, that He is not against you, is not coming in this world to condemn it, but He has done so to bring you back to Him. See the light. See who He is. Focus on Him alone.

Let's pray as we close. Heavenly Father, we come to you today as people with nothing in our hands at all. Lord, you fill us up. You are the light that when we see you, you give us joy and salvation. We pray, Lord, that as we go into this world, which can be so confused with the things of darkness, we ask that you would allow us to bring your light, a light that brings grace and peace, a light that brings truth, a light that brings a way to be reconnected with God that is all about you and not us. In this Lord, we pray that more and more people will be connected with you through Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.