

Lent 4-March 10, 2024

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Church

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, and John 3:14-21

"But God" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

I'm not sure how often you have thought about this truth, but throughout the bible, we learn that our Lord works under the sign of the opposite. Using the words of Martin Luther, "What does this mean?" It means that the Lord often does things the opposite of what we would expect. All of today's scriptures are prime examples of what may seem to us a strange or opposite way that the Lord responds to what we think we need. The prophet Isaiah describes the Lord's opposing thoughts to ours with these words, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways." The Lord goes on to say our thoughts and ways are not even close to the Lord's by saying, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Our thoughts and ways are at the other extreme opposite end of our Lord's. The good news for us in this reverse thinking of our Lord is that we most often don't know what is best for us, but God always does.

Those two words, "But God" are found frequently in the bible. We think or do one thing, but God is there to turn us in the right direction of thought and action. Not many weeks ago, we had the story of Jonah as the Old Testament reading. This story of Jonah is full of opposite thoughts and actions. Jonah was told to preach to the wicked city of Nineveh, but that was not what Jonah thought was a good idea, so he headed the opposite direction and decided not to preach to them. Soon after Jonah did the opposite of what the Lord told him to do, we read the words, but the Lord appeared and hurled a great wind upon the sea. When Jonah was thrown overboard it could have been the end for Jonah, but that was not the Lord's plan, so we read, but the Lord sent the fish to rescue Jonah. When Jonah was angry at the Lord for forgiving the people of Nineveh, the Lord wouldn't let Jonah sulk in his anger. The next words after Jonah expresses his angry, are but God confronted Jonah and asked him if it was right for him to be angry. Jonah's thoughts and ways were at odds with the Lord's, but God saved Jonah and used him because that was HIS plan and not Jonah's.

The people who were complaining against God and Moses in the first reading for today had different plans than the Lord had for them. They had forgotten that the Lord had just delivered them from slavery and was providing manna and quail daily for them to eat. However, now they were complaining that they had no food and no water and then added that they detested the miserable food that they had. First, they said they had no food. Then they said they didn't like the food they had. They sounded like many of us who look into our refrigerators that are full of food and respond that there is nothing to eat. You often hear school children talk about what there was to eat at school. They sometimes complain and say, "When I went through the lunch line and looked at the food, I decided that was nothing to eat." I remember during the year of COVID when supplies of many things were short and people would come home from the store saying that the shelves were empty even though they brought bags of food home from the store.

The people did the same in the first lesson for today when they complained to the Lord that they had nothing to eat. The response they had logically hoped from the Lord would be that he would provide some food that would please them. But God didn't send food. Instead, he did what seemed to be the opposite by sending poisonous snakes to bite the people. When the poisonous snakes began biting the people, they realized their sin and went to Moses to complain again and told him to pray to the Lord to take away the snakes. Moses did exactly as they wished, and the Lord heard the prayer that Moses prayed. But God, instead of taking away the snakes, told Moses, "Make a poisonous snake and put it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." The Lord did the opposite of what they wanted, but God instead decided to use what they wanted removed from them to save them.

One of my favorite scenes in the Adam Sandler movie, Mr. Deeds, is when Deeds asks a large group of people if what they hoped to be when they were sixth graders was the same as what they ended up doing as adults. A wealthy older man dressed like a cowboy from Texas got up to say that he wanted to be a veterinarian when he was in the sixth grade. Deeds asked him why he wanted to be a veterinarian to which he replied, "because I wanted to help animals". Then Deeds asked this man if he was now a veterinarian. He responds, "No". Deeds asks him what he does, and he replies, "I own a chain of slaughterhouses." Deeds says, "Well I guess you kind of went the other way on that dream." And so, it is with our Lord. He accomplishes His will by doing the opposite of what we wish for or expect him to do.

God does the opposite of what we would think in the second lesson for today too. The first three verses of this reading describe how we were dead in our trespasses. We lived among the passions of our flesh and senses. Verse 4 changes the tone of what is happening to us with the words once again that change everything. But God. But God does not want us dead. He wants us to be fully alive. God uses his mercy and love to raise us up from death to new life in Christ. God does not wait until we look like we have a spark within us that will grow into a flame of life. God turns us to Christ when we are dead. God turns us to Christ when we realize we have nothing within us to save ourselves and there is only one person remaining to help us. Christ rises us up when we are still dead. Most often our hope and prayer is for the Lord to give us a boost to get us up and going rather than admit we are dead and need to be resurrected. God loves us the opposite of what we would expect.

If you have John 3:16 highlighted in your bible and memorized in your mind, do the same with Ephesians 2:8,9 that you find in the second lesson for today. It wasn't until I was in Confirmation when I first read this verse for the first time and memorized it. Until then, I thought I was saved when the list of my good deeds was longer than the things that I had done that disappointed God. It was then that I learned about faith and grace and how they worked the opposite of good deeds. I learned that it was not my list of good deeds that decided if the Lord would save me rather than condemn me. It was by grace that I was saved through faith. Faith was not something I could keep track of on a list. Faith was invisible. Faith was simply trusting in a promise that was given to me by God himself and that promise is first delivered in the waters of baptism. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and it is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

Not even your faith is your own doing. It is a gift that is given to you. You are saved by faith and faith is not something you muster up within yourself, but it is given to you through the work of the Holy Spirit. Faith doesn't come from evidence of your work, but it is given to you by what you hear the Lord speak to you. Everything else in the world around us is based on evidence of your performance, but God doesn't look for what you have done, but sees in your heart what you believe.

We confess in the Apostles' Creed that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. We often have the impression from what we see on TV that judges sit on their benches to send people to jail or to prison. Judges use what the people had done wrong to punish them. This is the biggest sign of the opposite that Jesus Christ, who is our righteous judge, does for you and me. Jesus Christ does not use our sin not to condemn us, but to save us.

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world. But God, so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Thanks be to God who gives you and I what we really need. Amen