

"THE MOUNT OF SACRIFICE"

JOHN 3:14-21

FOURTH S. IN LENT

MESSIAH, BOERNE

MARCH 10, 2024

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY
SPIRIT. AMEN.

TEXT: JN 3:14-21

LORD GOD, HEAVENLY FATHER, YOU GAVE YOUR ONLY SON TO SUFFER
AND DIE ON THE CROSS SACRIFICIALLY FOR US AND FOR OUR
SALVATION. GRANT US THE HOLY SPIRIT THAT WE MAY BELIEVE IN
HIM WHOLEHEARTEDLY AND LIVE AND LOVE OTHERS SACRIFICIALLY
ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD, FOR WE PRAY THIS IN JESUS' NAME.
AMEN.

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST:

DURING WORLD WAR II, A POLISH FRANCISCAN PRIEST NAMED
MAXIMILLIAN KOLBE REFUSED TO GIVE WAY TO THE TERROR OF
ADOLPH HITLER AND HIS EVIL FORCES. HE BELIEVED THAT GOD
HAD WON—AND WOULD WIN AGAIN—THE VICTORY OVER THE POWERS OF
DARKNESS. IMPRISONED FOR HIS OPPOSITION TO THE NAZIS,
FATHER KOLBE HEARD THE PRISON COMMANDER ORDER TEN PRISONERS
TO DIE BY STARVATION AS A REPRISAL FOR THE ESCAPE OF ONE.
WHEN THE TEN WERE BROUGHT TOGETHER, KOLBE SAW A PALE,
QUIVERING POLISH ARMY SERGEANT SOBBING, "MY WIFE AND
CHILDREN . . . MY WIFE AND CHILDREN."

MOVED WITH COMPASSION AT THE SIGHT, FATHER KOLBE
PUSHED FORWARD THROUGH THE RIGID FORMATION OF PRISONERS
LOOKING ON, PAST THE SECURITY GUARDS, RIGHT UP TO THE

COMMANDANT HIMSELF. LOOKING HIM STRAIGHT IN THE EYES, HE SAID IN IMPECCABLE GERMAN, "I WISH TO MAKE A REQUEST, PLEASE." "WHAT DO YOU WANT?" SNEERED THE OFFICER. "I WANT TO DIE IN THE PLACE OF THIS PRISONER," HE SAID, POINTING TO THE WEeping SERGEANT. "I HAVE NO CHILDREN OR WIFE." THE STUNNED PRISONERS THOUGHT BOTH MEN WOULD SURELY DIE, ONE FOR HIS WEAKNESS, THE OTHER FOR HIS AUDACITY, BUT INSTEAD THE COMMANDANT SNAPPED, "REQUEST GRANTED." THE SERGEANT WAS RELEASED, AND KOLBE WAS TAKEN AWAY TO DIE.

FATHER KOLBE ASCENDED THE MOUNT OF SACRIFICE IN THE NOBLEST WAY, OUT OF FAITH IN HIS LORD JESUS CHRIST. HE GAVE HIMSELF FOR ANOTHER, FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS CHRIST, WHO GAVE HIMSELF FOR US ALL. HE ACTED OUT THE WORDS OF THE APOSTLE JOHN: "WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US" (1 JN 4:19) AND "GREATER LOVE HAS NO ONE THAN THIS, THAT SOMEONE LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS FRIENDS" (JN 15:13). WHAT ABOUT YOU AND ME? HAS THE LOVE OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS EMPOWERED US TO CLIMB THE MOUNT OF SACRIFICE? TODAY, LET'S CONSIDER CHRIST'S SACRIFICE OF HIMSELF FOR US, AND HOW, MOVED BY WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US, WE MAY OFFER OURSELVES TO GOD AND TO ONE ANOTHER FOR JESUS' SAKE.

PICTURE THE SETTING OF OUR TEXT. NICODEMUS WALKS QUIETLY THROUGH EMPTY STREETS AT NIGHT IN ORDER TO SPEAK

WITH JESUS ABOUT SOME DEEP THEOLOGICAL TRUTHS. RATHER THAN SPEAKING IMPERSONALLY ABOUT ABSTRACT IDEAS, HOWEVER, JESUS QUESTIONS HIS VISITOR ABOUT HIS PERSONAL SPIRITUAL CONDITION. "DO YOU JUST CONSIDER ME TO BE A GOOD TEACHER," JESUS ASKS, "OR HAVE YOU BEEN BORN AGAIN INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD THROUGH FAITH IN ME AS YOUR SAVIOR?" JESUS EXPLAINS TO THE PUZZLED NICODEMUS THAT HE MUST BE BORN AGAIN, THAT IS, BORN FROM ABOVE BY THE HOLY SPIRIT. THAT SPECIAL KIND OF SUPERNATURAL BIRTH COMES ABOUT ONLY THROUGH AN ACT OF GOD AND TAKES PLACE THROUGH "WATER AND THE SPIRIT." BY MEANS OF HIS WORD AND THE WATER OF HOLY BAPTISM, GOD SENDS HIS HOLY SPIRIT INTO US, GIVING US FAITH IN CHRIST, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS, SALVATION, AND ETERNAL LIFE. THE BAPTIZED ARE MADE CHILDREN OF GOD, THEIR HEAVENLY FATHER. THEY ARE BORN ANEW.

WITHOUT HIS NEW BIRTH, A PERSON IS UNABLE TO SEE OF ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD. THOSE BORN ONLY IN THE NATURAL MANNER INHERIT THE SINFUL NATURE COMMON TO ALL HUMAN FLESH, WHICH IS AT ENMITY WITH GOD, AND ARE EXCLUDED FROM HIS KINGDOM OF GRACE. WITHOUT THE SECOND BIRTH, A PERSON REMAINS IN THEIR FALLEN STATE, NOW AND FOREVER.

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, THE ISRAELITES HAD GRUMBLED AGAINST GOD AS THEY WANDERED IN THE DESERT. SO, GOD IN HIS

RIGHTEOUS ANGER SENT POISONOUS SNAKES TO PUNISH THEM FOR THEIR SIN, AS THE SNAKE IS THE SYMBOL OF SATAN AND REPRESENTS REBELLION AGAINST GOD. YET GOD IN HIS MERCY ALSO PROVIDED A MEANS OF SALVATION. HE TOLD MOSES TO LIFT UP A BRONZE SERPENT HIGH ON A POLE TO PROVIDE HEALING FOR THOSE ISRAELITES WHO HAD BEEN BITTEN. WHEN THOSE WHO HAD FAITH IN THE PROMISE OF GOD LOOKED AT THE BRONZE SERPENT, THEY WERE SAVED.

SO ALSO, JESUS SAYS, *HE* MUST BE LIFTED UP IN SACRIFICE SO THAT EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE. SINLESS JESUS WILL BE MADE A SERPENT; HE WILL BE MADE SIN FOR US AND BE CURSED AS HE BEARS THE SIN OF THE WORLD. IN THIS WAY, HE WILL PROVIDE ETERNAL HEALING FOR THOSE WHO LOOK TO HIM IN FAITH. ST. PAUL SAYS, "FOR IT IS BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED THROUGH FAITH—AND THIS NOT FROM YOURSELVES, IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD" (EPH 2:8). MANY MAKE SACRIFICES FOR THE WRONG REASONS, BUT JESUS MADE HIS SACRIFICE FOR THE RIGHT ONE: IN OBEDIENCE TO GOD THE FATHER AND OUT OF LOVE FOR HUMANITY, HE GAVE HIS LIFE WILLINGLY AND GENEROUSLY FOR THE SALVATION OF THE WORLD.

AS YOU HEAR THE MESSAGE OF CHRIST TODAY, THE SPIRIT IS WORKING IN YOUR HEART, RENEWING YOUR BAPTISM AND GRANTING FORGIVENESS, NEW LIFE, AND STRENGTH FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING.

THIS IS GOING ON RIGHT NOW! LIKE ONE OF THE ISRAELITES IN THE DESERT, ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOUR LIFE HAS BEEN BITTEN BY THE POISON OF SIN, AND THAT YOU CAN'T SAVE YOURSELF. THEN LOOK TO JESUS LIFTED HIGH ON THE CROSS OF CALVARY, SUFFERING FOR YOUR SIN TO EARN FORGIVENESS FOR YOU. BELIEVE THAT HE DIED AND ROSE AGAIN FOR YOUR SALVATION. YOU ARE A NEW CREATION IN CHRIST!

ST. PAUL WRITES, "THEREFORE, I URGE YOU, BROTHERS, IN VIEW OF GOD'S MERCY, TO OFFER YOUR BODIES AS LIVING SACRIFICES, HOLY AND PLEASING TO GOD—THIS IS YOUR SPIRITUAL ACT OF WORSHIP" (ROM 12:1). THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS CHRIST MOVES US TO SACRIFICE OURSELVES IN SERVICE. ONE ASPECT OF OUR SERVICE IS SELF-DENIAL. PAUL SAYS, "FOR WE KNOW THAT OUR OLD SELF WAS CRUCIFIED WITH HIM SO THAT THE BODY OF SIN MIGHT BE DONE AWAY WITH, THAT WE SHOULD NO LONGER BE SLAVES TO SIN" (ROM 6:6). EVERY DAY WE ARE TO LIVE OUT OUR BAPTISM BY DYING TO SIN AND RISING AGAIN TO LIFE FOR GOD.

WE CONSECRATE TO GOD OUR MINDS, WILLS, HEARTS, IDEAS, PLANS, DESIRES, AND ALL OUR ACTIVITIES. CHRIST TAKES ALL OUR FACULTIES, AND SINCE THEY ARE FILLED WITH SIN, HE PUTS THEM TO DEATH ON THE CROSS. HE THEN GIVES US HIMSELF IN EXCHANGE: HIS OWN MIND, WILL, HEART, IDEAS, PLANS, AND DESIRES. OUR OLD SELF IS DENIED AND CHRIST IS AFFIRMED.

THROUGH BAPTISM CHRIST BRINGS US INTO HIS BODY, THE CHURCH, AND HE PLACES HIMSELF IN US THROUGH HIS SPIRIT. THE ACTION IS ALL HIS.

A SECOND ASPECT OF SACRIFICE IS SERVING OTHERS. HAVING BEEN REDEEMED BY CHRIST AND RENEWED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, YOU AND I NOW LIVE IN SERVICE TO OTHERS, WALKING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS. WE DO NOT DO THIS TO MERIT GOD'S BLESSING, BUT ONLY AS AN EXPRESSION OF OUR FAITH AND CONFIDENCE IN CHRIST ALONE.

THERE'S A TRUE STORY ABOUT KAGAWA, A YOUNG JAPANESE ORPHAN WHO WAS TAKEN INTO A STRIFE-TORN HOME. HE HAD LITTLE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE, BUT EVENTUALLY HE WAS ABLE TO GO TO SCHOOL AND BEGAN TO LEARN ENGLISH FROM AN AMERICAN MISSIONARY WHO ALSO SHARED THE GOSPEL WITH HIM. THE LOVE OF CHRIST SWEEPED OVER HIM AND GAVE HIM NEW LIFE. HE BECAME ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL JAPANESE CHRISTIANS OF ALL TIME. HE COULD HAVE RISEN TO PROMINENCE IN POLITICS, LITERATURE, OR BUSINESS, BUT HE GAVE ALL THAT UP TO SPEND HIS LIFE SHARING THE LOVE HE FOUND IN CHRIST. HE FOUNDED ORPHANAGES AND HOMES FOR THE ELDERLY. HE PROTESTED THE BEGINNINGS OF WORLD WAR II, WAS ARRESTED FOR IT, AND WAS THREATENED WITH DEATH.

WHEN THE WAR WAS OVER, EMPEROR HIROHITO WENT TO VISIT KAWAGA, THE ACCUSED TRAITOR WHO HAD SERVED THE LIFTED-UP LORD CHRIST. YOU SEE, EVEN THOSE OUTSIDE THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY RECOGNIZED KAWAGA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIETY BECAUSE HE HAD ESTABLISHED SO MANY INSTITUTIONS TO HELP THE POOR, THE ELDERLY, AND THE HOMELESS. HE CLIMBED THE MOUNT OF SACRIFICE KNOWING THAT WHAT HE GAVE UP WAS RETURNED TO HIM MANY TIMES OVER BY THE JOY THAT COMES WITH SERVING CHRIST.

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST, IF YOU ARE BECOMING LETHARGIC IN DOING GOOD WORKS—IF YOU HAVE LOST HEART AND ARE JUST GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS—LOOK AGAIN AT JESUS CHRIST ON THE CROSS, CONQUERING THE MOUNT OF SACRIFICE. HE DID IT FOR YOU. HE FORGAVE ALL YOUR FAILINGS AND GAVE YOU A NEW HEART WHEN YOU WERE BORN AGAIN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT IN THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM. GOD DAILY RENEWS HIS BAPTISMAL GRACE IN YOU AND CALLS ON YOU TODAY TO LIVE MORE FOR OTHERS THAN YOU DID YESTERDAY AND TO PROCLAIM THE LOVE OF CHRIST MORE POWERFULLY THROUGH YOUR SERVICE. MAY WE ALL OFFER OUR LIVES TO THE PRAISE AND GLORY OF CHRIST, WHO OFFERED HIMSELF FOR OUR SALVATION ON THE MOUNT OF SUFFERING. AMEN.