

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2006
Sermon by Rev Timothy A Leitzke

It was a cool summer evening in the south of France. The sunlight was failing. We were sitting in the open yard of what used to be the chapel tower in the medieval city of Carcassonne. The “new” chapel was built centuries ago, and this tower had long since become a park that opened to a lovely little cobblestone plaza packed with tables, outdoor seating for several restaurants, and the tourists were chatting jovially in the gentle glow of candlelight. To top it all off, the DJ was playing Prince. <Cue: “I Wanna Be Your Lover” by Prince> Ah, that’s the one! Standing in the park and looking down on the plaza was a massive cross of corrugated iron holding an emaciated iron Christ. The crucifix was not the elephant in the room, ignored so forcefully that it was impossible to deny; no, it really was as though the crucifix wasn’t even there. The diners ate the delicious local food.

In the book of Numbers the Israelites complain about the food God provides, and in response God sends poisonous snakes to bite and kill them. The snake smacks of great symbolism. It is after all the snake that promises Eve that she and Adam can be like gods if only they break God’s lone commandment. Now, in exchange for Israel’s rebellion against the cafeteria lunch menu, God reminds the people of that rebellion as old as creation itself: Sin, which separates this world from God. So while God sends the snakes the Sin is human.

Furthermore, God offers a way out of Sin.

Moses makes his own snake out of bronze and hangs it up for all to see, so that if they are bitten they can look at the snake and be healed. A story with such symbolism deserves a symbolic interpretation. There is, for the Israelites, something curative and healthy about facing the Sin that keeps them from God. They rebel and are set upon by the symbol of Sin itself. When they look upon the bronze serpent they acknowledge their Sin, and God grants forgiveness. Their Sin is sent away. God forgives them, and God forgives us.

There is something decidedly public about the forgiveness in the bronze serpent, and in the iron Christ of Carcassonne. The God present in the bronze serpent and in the crucified Christ wants to be noticed. We have a tendency to ignore God in public, to turn our backs as the diners in Carcassonne turned away from the cross. We tend to feel that faith is a private matter. Whether we feel uncomfortable discussing our personal beliefs, or we don't feel we understand our faith enough, or we don't want to feel like we're forcing our beliefs on others, we keep faith private. Friends of Christ, crucifixion is about as *public* as you can get. God has chosen this flagrantly *public* means of revelation. Christ dying this *public* death gives the centurion at the foot of the cross faith in God. God lifts up the Son of Humanity *publicly* to save the cosmos.

Not only is the message of our faith broadcast publicly; the nature of faith is public. Faith happens in our interaction with others. St. James says, "Faith 'alone'—having no works—is dead.... For as the body apart from its breath is dead, so faith apart from works is dead." (Jas 2:17,26) God has forgiven each of

you as individuals out of love for you; the faith God has given you is dead if it is not shared. In Holy Baptism God promises to remember us forever. In Holy Communion God shapes us and nourishes us as food nourishes our bodies. In both sacraments God promises and delivers forgiveness, sanctification—the ability to do the things God wants us to do—and union with Christ and with one another. We have these gifts because God so loved the world. They are not our private possessions.

Friends of Christ, when we gather for this holy meal we come not in shrouded privacy but in full union with our brothers and sisters in Christ, both here and now and at all times and in all places. When the bread is given and you hear the words, “given for you,” you are united with those before and after you in line. The meal served from this table cannot be contained by any fence; it bursts out and into each of us. Keeping that gift private, to ourselves, leaves it dead. I recently asked the Confirmation class where the body and blood of Christ go when you eat and drink them. One of our learners—I won’t name him but his initials are Spencer Blazak—suggested that they go into one’s colon. I assured the class that God does indeed redeem even our intestines, but what a wonderful image that had been given to me! Faith, received in word and water, bread and wine, when not shared, goes into your colon. Faith not shared is faith wasted. Private faith is flushed down the drain. *Public* faith is life for you and for me. Public faith is faith put to use. It’s the faith that goes into our muscles, into our minds, into our interactions with one another.

When the assisting minister looks you in the eye and says, “The blood of Christ, shed for you,” that is public faith. When your sister in Christ hugs you in the midst of a bad day, that is public faith. When your brother in Christ listens to you, that is public faith. When you live shaped by the love poured out for you in Christ, that is public faith. When we break bread together, when we drink coffee together, when we stock a food pantry together, when we comfort a loved one, when we comfort a stranger, that is public faith, and public faith is living faith.

I sense a response, “But Pastor, what if I was alone on a desert island? Would my faith be dead?” To that I would say, first, “You’re not on a desert island!” Second, even on a desert island you are not really alone. The gifts that God has given to you remain with you, God remains with you, and your faith is lived out even on that island. You have the birds and the fish to interact with. You are not in a vacuum. Your faith is alive in your relationship with your surroundings, whatever they are.

Faith begins in God. Faith begins in the public announcement of God’s love for all creation. There is nothing secret. There is nothing private. The Son of Humanity is lifted up. God is revealed on the cross, publicly, so that the entire cosmos can see. The bronze serpent publicly promises healing. The iron Christ of Carcassonne stands over the plaza and promises forgiveness, and I share it with you now rather than let it go to waste. Not everyone noticed it, true. Perhaps the Christ of Carcassonne was not public enough. Perhaps attention could have been drawn if the DJ had simply pulled a different tune from his Prince anthology. The

Church has spent a ton of energy on denouncing the purple clad pop star from Minneapolis, but the words of God have been on his lips at least once. You just have to know the right song. <Cue: “I Would Die 4 U”—play all> May the love of God who would and did die for us shape us and lead us into a public, living faith, for the love of all the world. Amen.