

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Scandalous Message"
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Celebration of the Cross

We are all born with a deadly disease, a terminal illness called "sin," rebellion to God, a propensity to serve self rather than God or others and a bent to go along with those who prefer lying, stealing and killing or at least watch movies or read books that do these things. Does this sound like a scandalous message to you? Or does it explain a lot about what we see and hear on the news on a daily basis. Does it help us see ourselves, at least the dark side of ourselves so that we can be prepared for some good news?

We are made in God's image and we do have many gifts and positive abilities in this life. But these are marred through and through with our sinful propensity to the point where we desperately need a Saviour, someone to save us from our rebellion, from our tendency away from health, away from wholeness, away from the greatest good to narcissistic tendencies of control, power, willful or unconscious deception, deadly competition and infected relationships.

Such a worldwide virus as our spiritual condition makes us realize that the cure for a disease would have to be even more dramatic than the illness itself. The virus actually kills the spiritual life of the individual, most often without the infected even knowing it has happened. This is something like finding out your computer has automatically been sending out notices to your friends, telling them to send money to a third party because yours was stolen. We need someone to reveal to us that this sin problem is worse than we thought. A radical solution is required.

God tried a series of sacrifices and celebrations to be made to give thanks for the animal life that sustains our diets and to teach us about spiritual life. But these only addressed the outer condition and didn't change the heart. So God Himself came to visit us and present the final anti-viral solution that would bring life rather than just behavioral change. God came as Messiah, as Deliverer, as Suffering Servant, as Wounded Healer in Jesus of Nazareth.

Some hoped he would have set up a political kingdom in that day, kick out the oppressors and have a human kingdom from then on, just like King David or better. But instead, he came as an obscure carpenter's son who

fulfilled the prophesy of Isaiah 61; bringing good news to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming freedom for the captives, releasing prisoners from darkness, proclaiming God's favor, providing for those who are grieving, clothing them with royal beauty, joy and praise instead of despair. We too can receive the same as we say "yes" today to Jesus, "yes" to his work in us, "yes" to learning more about his perspective on our lives.

Jesus fulfills God's will and provides the final sacrifice for our sins; the ultimate Lamb, who gives us a final Passover from the Destroyer who wants to see us ultimately separated from God and tormented forever. So we talk about the cross often, because there is so much to learn at the cross. The cross is not simply the lowest form of capital punishment, where slaves were tortured to death in a well travelled intersection, to warn others not to commit their crimes. This is what it was. But Jesus allowing this to happen to himself as a propitiation, as a payment against our debt of rebellion, against our death sentence was completely unexpected. No one saw this coming, except the Lord.

God's creativity is not child abuse. God freely gives himself for us. God creatively rescues us where we cannot rescue ourselves. And we are surprised. Just as we are surprised when a virus takes over our personal computer, so we wonder how God can do this. We wonder because we do not understand the spiritual code that God writes into this new program just as the devil and his team had hacked into our own personal programs and operating systems. God writes a new operating system. All we have to do is say, "Yes." Enter. We can say to Jesus, "Enter into me with your new life. Begin overwriting and destroying the old life of rebellion and destruction. Show me your way and I will walk in it, O God."

And so this message is received or rejected. In the time Paul was writing, he noted two groups. There were the Greeks who had the tradition of philosophy and logic behind them. This made no sense to them, just foolishness; as with agnostics and atheists today. The other group was that of the Jewish people, with whom he himself identified as a Jew. For them, the cross contradicted the Scriptures that speak of the one hung on a tree as cursed and nothing more. According to them, this one did not do the miracles needed to be believed. Even though he did. In effect, most everyone who cared about spiritual things, rejected this new message as too scandalous to take serious.

And so we find ourselves in the same position today. So many of us and so many around us have been bitten by the poisonous snakes of disbelief that we believe there is no cure. It is too simple to look up at something hung on a tree and be healed. That is Moses' story. The people's rebellion brought out the snakes, and when God brought a solution, it didn't make sense to some of them, perhaps even many of them. So they would rather die than try something non-sensical that their leader suggested.

Today our children do not receive the Christian Message in public school. They receive something often anti-Christian at the university. In between, we have a few minutes with them, but parents have the brunt of their children's spiritual lives hanging on them; and they seem to have so little time for such a thing as Bible story or reading.

So we are once again in the context of a generation not knowing the scandalous message that we maintain and proclaim. Don't ever fool yourself into thinking that the Christian message is not controversial. It always has been controversial and scandalous. The notion that there is one cure for the virus; rather than whatever and whoever others choose, that will always be scandalous.

Our holding onto our identity as followers of Jesus will always be opposed, not by all, or at all times, but by many and often. We should prepare ourselves for such. This is not a call to violent reaction or entrenched defensiveness. No, this is a call to take up your cross, to understand what your Christian identity means to you, and to be able to wisely and humbly share what you believe.

And this is not to say that God completes His work in us when we say, "yes." No, the work is started, but the overwriting of the virus and the new operating system takes time to establish. It won't be perfect in this life, but will be perfected when we meet the Lord face to face. Meanwhile, we have regular washings for regular soilings. Sorry to change the computer metaphor to a laundry metaphor. Perhaps I should have said de-fragmenting our lives so that God can get our act together as we trust God.

You know what God has done in your life. Give thanks for that which he did long ago, but also be looking for those times and places and relationships that God has touched and amazed you. These are the treasures of our lives that we can share with others. The cross is one of those treasures. It is not

just bling, not just costume jewelry, but rather the centerpiece of how God gives us life.

Let us thank the Lord for this and keep it in mind as we dream together for the church we always wanted to have.

Let us pray.