

“Immunization Against Sin”

Sue Kidd was pregnant with her second child. Her three-year-old son, Bobby, was afraid of the dark. Sue tried everything. She tried leaving a light on in the hall and a night-light on in Bob's room. Nothing she did helped; he was still scared of the dark and would cry out in the middle of the night. One night as she held him against her to comfort him, he touched her round pregnant belly. Bobby asked, "Mama, is it dark inside there where my little brother is?" He was convinced that his yet unborn sister would be a brother. "Yes," his mother replied, "it's dark in there." As Bobby thought further he asked, "He doesn't even have a night-light, does he?" "No," Sue responded, "not even a night-light." Then Bobby hugged his mother as she patted his head. Bobby had one more question for his mother that night, "Do you think my brother is scared all by himself in there?" "I don't think so," Sue explained, "because he's not really alone. He's inside of me," It was a very special moment between mother and son. Suddenly Sue had an inspiration. "And it's the same way with you." Sue explained to her son. "When it's dark and you think you're all by yourself, you really aren't. I carry you inside me too. Right here in my heart." Sue remembers looking into her son's eyes, wondering if he understood what she meant. Having nothing else to say, Bobby went back to bed and was soon asleep. That was the last time he woke up scared in the middle of the night.

Children aren't the only ones who are afraid and don't like the dark. There was a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a high-ranking member of the Pharisees but he was confused and frightened. Nothing was making sense to him. The more he struggled to understand, the more confused and frightened he became. Then he heard about Jesus, and he thought that perhaps Jesus could help him.

Under the cover of darkness Nicodemus set out to find this teacher. He caught up with Jesus on the outskirts of town. Unfortunately Jesus wasn't much help. At one point in their conversation Jesus tells Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again." Jesus was speaking of *spiritual* rebirth, but Nicodemus was thinking of *physical* birth.

"How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Nicodemus asks. "Can he go back into his mother's womb?" Nicodemus was confused. Jesus simply wasn't making any sense. Then Jesus reminded Nicodemus of the time Moses and the children of Israel were in the desert. Certainly Nicodemus, a high-ranking Pharisee, would understand an illustration from the pages of the Torah. Out in the desert some of the people of Israel were being bitten by snakes. In fact some of the Israelites had died as a result of snake bites. It was such a problem that Moses sought out God for a solution. God instructed Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

Moses did as God had instructed him. He placed a snake high on a pole. When the people looked at the snake they were healed. They no longer even feared snakes. Nicodemus remembered the story Jesus was referring to. In the same way, Jesus tells Nicodemus, people will one day look to the cross and live. " Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," says Jesus, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

I remember hearing this story as a youngster and wondering how something that could kill you could become something that healed you. It seemed to make more sense when I learned how they make vaccines. To make a polio or smallpox vaccine, you take some of the bacteria and form a vaccine from it. They took something that could kill you and turned it into something that healed you.

This lesson came to mind when I look at the Medical Emblem. It's on your bulletin cover this morning. Although it originally stems from Greek Mythology, the Staff of Asclepius is the staff with a single serpent on it. This staff, with two serpents on it, is called the Caduceus of Mercury. A serpent on a staff - - - look at it and LIVE!

If you were listening to the news reports this week, they are making some important discoveries in how to treat children with peanut allergies. They treat these allergies by feeding the children Peanuts! Duke and Arkansas Children's Hospital researchers said the peanut doses start as small as 1/1000th of a peanut. Eight to 10 months later, the children ingest the equivalent of up to 15 peanuts per day. They warn that if you have a child with peanut allergies that you do not try this at home. These children stay on that daily therapy for several years and are closely monitored.

Using a snake to cure snake bites? Using Peanuts to cure Peanut Allergies? So what about Sin?! How do we cure the power of sin? By Sinning? No! But it is sin that brought a cure for Sin. Sin was causing us to perish. God saw this. But "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have Eternal Life." This is why Jesus refers to the story from the book of Numbers and says in John, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have Eternal Life."

It is our sin that caused Jesus to be lifted up on the Cross. And it is Jesus on the Cross that took away the power of Sin. The Israelites looked at the serpent in order to be healed of the serpents poison. We look to the Cross in order to be healed from the consequences of our Sin. This was the message Jesus was bringing to the people of the world. And this was he message that got him crucified.

Sin? What sin? And even if there was a little bit of Sin, who is this Jesus to tell us that

we need healing, let alone healing from him? Why wouldn't they accept this news of God's grace and forgiveness? The last part of today's Gospel explains it pretty simply. "...the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that they may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

This past week we had St. Patrick's Day, so it is appropriate to tell a story about the O'Learys and the MacMillans. The O'Learys and the MacMillans lived as neighbors at the turn of the 20th century. One day a young man in a suit came to their village to explain that they would soon have electricity for the first time. The MacMillans responded with their typical enthusiasm and filled out the appropriate papers to have their house wired.

The O'Learys were more cautious. After all, they had lived for generations without electricity and had managed just fine. They weren't about to throw money after every passing fad. So they decided to wait. If electricity was as good as everyone said, they could always sign up later.

In the weeks that followed, the MacMillans busily prepared their house for electrical power. They clamped wires and sockets to the walls and hung bulbs from the ceiling. When the big day finally came, the MacMillans invited their neighbors, including the O'Learys, to a grand lighting party. With a dramatic flourish Mr. MacMillan threw a switch and the bulbs began to glow for the first time. The MacMillan house was illuminated more brightly than it had ever been lit before. There was a gasp. "How lovely!" someone said. Then another gasp. "How filthy!" someone else said. It was true. No one had noticed it before in the dim light, but years of oil lamps had left a film of dingy soot over everything. The walls were grimy, there were cobwebs in the corner, and dust covered the floor.

The O'Learys decided right then and there that they would never install electricity in their home. They would never suffer the humiliation of having their dirty home exposed by the light.

After the party, the MacMillans went to work. They scrubbed the soot off the walls and ceiling, cleaned the cobwebs, and swept away the dust. They had indeed been embarrassed by their dirty home when the lights came on, but within a day, their house was cleaner than it had ever been. Meanwhile, the O'Learys continued to live comfortably in their dimly lit home filled with soot, cobwebs, and filth.

Many people today choose to live in the dark. They don't want anyone to see the dirt, what's really going on in their lives. Sometimes they don't want to see it themselves. They avoid the light for fear that they will see the truth and be forced to clean up their acts.

"...the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that

their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that they may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Christ is the Light of the World. Yes- he has pointed out how sinful mankind has been. But through our sin he has given us a cure for sin. Because of our sin, Christ was lifted up on a cross. Once sin kept us separated from the love of God. But no more. To be cured from serpent bites, the Israelites looked upon a serpent. To be cured from Sin Christians look to the Cross. We have been immunized against sin!

Many people are afraid to accept the Light of Christ because it will reveal their sinfulness and their need for forgiveness. But God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

The message is pretty simply. Our lives were dirty. The light of Christ showed that it was Sin that made them dirty. Christ takes away the Sin and our lives have been made clean. We have been immunized against sin. The dirt can't stick to us anymore. But it took the life of Jesus Christ to make this happen. Let's work to live lives worthy of His sacrifice. Amen.