

Midweek Lenten Vespers
February 21, 2024

QUESNEL

“The Word Is Near You” (Romans 10:5-13)

Imagine you are young and healthy—well, wait, right off the bat, that may hard for some of us to imagine, being young and healthy again! But for now, try to imagine that you are young and healthy, with all your life ahead of you. You’re married, you’ve got a couple of little children who need you—you’ve got a lot to live for. However, your doctor has just informed you that you have an extremely rare and deadly disease. It isn’t affecting you just yet, and it won’t for some months still, but within two years, this disease will definitely take your life.

However, there is a ray of hope—and this is where you have to stretch your imagination a bit. There is an antidote for this extremely rare disease. But the problem is, the antidote itself is extremely rare. There are only two known doses found on the face of the earth. And the vials containing the antidote somehow were placed in two extremely remote locations—the most remote places on earth. One dose is found in a weatherproof box on the top of Mount Everest in the Himalayas. The other vial is inside a pressurized chest lying at the bottom of the Mariana Trench in the Pacific Ocean. Those are the only two doses there are. But this antidote will cure your disease, if only you can get to it in time.

Think of it. Mount Everest in the Himalayas, 30,000 feet high, the highest spot on earth. Now it is possible to reach the summit of Mount Everest, if you are in excellent shape, the weather cooperates, and you have the right equipment and a Tibetan Sherpa to guide you. Reaching the summit has been done a number of times.

Or then there is the Mariana Trench in the Pacific Ocean, 36,000 feet deep, the lowest spot on earth. Now it is possible to reach the bottom of the Mariana Trench, if you have a specially designed bathyscape, a diving vessel able to withstand the extreme pressures at the bottom of the ocean. Reaching that depth has been done three times.

Now if you were young and healthy and you had the means to do so, I imagine you would spare no expense or effort to go and get that antidote, whatever it took. You'd climb the highest mountain or plumb the ocean's depths, you'd do whatever it takes, to go and get that precious, life-giving medicine.

Now let's transfer this story to the spiritual side. Only let's up the ante, and up it quite a bit. You do have a deadly disease. It's called sin, and it will kill you. Indeed, it will damn you for eternity, your rebellion against God. That's the punishment such an outrage deserves, that man the creature, in his arrogance, should rebel against the Creator who gave him life. So this is the big Death we're talking about, the curse that your sin deserves.

But there is a way to escape this death and damnation. If you have righteousness, you will live. You need to be right with God, be in right standing before him, meet his perfect standard of righteousness, and, instead of death and damnation, you will have life and salvation. And so the question is, How will you get this righteousness? Can you even get it?

If you were healthy enough spiritually, and you were told, "This righteousness you're looking for—this righteousness before God that will bring you life instead of death, heaven instead of hell, paradise instead of perdition—oh, you can find it, of course. Here are the Ten Commandments. Now do them, and you will live." Well, friends, the possibility of you doing them sufficiently to earn your righteousness is even more remote than a lame man climbing Mount Everest or a dead man diving to the bottom of the Mariana Trench and coming back again. Yea, it is impossible. You cannot do it. Such a thing is too far beyond your reach. You don't have it in you.

So is there no hope? As far as the righteousness of the law is concerned, no, there is not. You are doomed. Death is your only future, and the deadness weighs over you even now.

But there is another way. There is an antidote, there is a cure. And the equally good news is, you don't have to climb a mountain or dive to the bottom of the ocean to find it! The cure comes to you. Or, as St. Paul says in our text, "The Word Is Near You."

"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is

Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

The word is near you, that is, the word of the gospel of Christ. Paul proclaimed it. Your pastor has been sent here to preach it to you. The Word of God, preached and taught into your ears and into your heart. The Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood, placed into your mouth. The word is near you, the good news of life and salvation in Christ. This is the saving faith you believe in your heart and confess with your lips. The Holy Spirit has put this word into your heart, giving you the gift of faith, so that now you do know it and confess it and call upon God’s name in faith.

This word tells you of a God who did not stay distant from us, even when we had sinned against him. No, our God has come near to us, in the person of his Son. This is Jesus Christ, who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven. Jesus, in his ministry, proclaimed, “The kingdom of heaven has come near, it is right at hand.” For Jesus himself brings God’s kingdom, with all of its blessings, to us. He has come near to us. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

God’s own Son came in the flesh and came among us, in order to rescue us from our deadly disease. He took our sins into himself, dying for them on the cross, shedding his blood for us. There is your antidote for sin and death, in the holy precious blood of Christ. And God’s Son is able to conquer death, as his resurrection shows, a resurrection he will share with us.

All this he does without any merit or worthiness on our part; it’s all by grace. And we do not have to do anything to find and receive the righteousness he won for us. It’s right near at hand. He brings it to us. It comes to us in his word, the word of the gospel.

This is what Paul is getting at, when he writes: “But the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

No Mount Everest expedition or Mariana Trench exploration needed! Good news! The word is near you. It is the life-giving message of salvation in Christ, forgiving your sins and delivering you from death. It is a word of grace, of gift, God bestowing his riches upon you, freely, for the sake of Christ.

Righteousness, the only cure for your disease—the righteousness of God that opens up the gates of heaven—this righteousness comes to you through the word of the gospel. You receive it by faith, as the Holy Spirit plants the word in your heart. And then your mouth happily confesses what you believe. The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.

Yes, dear friends, the word is near you. You don't have to travel to the summit of Mount Everest to find it. It's right here on Hartley St in Quesnel.