

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 19, 2014
Romans 10:14-21¹

Part I

Portland is known as the city of bridges. It is, because Portland lies on the west side of the Willamette River. So bridges had to be built to connect us, on the east side of the river, to the city. Eight of them span the Willamette. That's what bridges do. They connect the commuter to the downtown office; the shopper to the downtown merchants; the sightseer to Portland's downtown attractions. Without those bridges, you can't cross over. You are stuck on the other side.

It's not surprising then, that in times of war bridges become strategic real estate. If the bridge enables the movement of troops and supplies, it will be protected. When it is on enemy territory, efforts are made, at the very least to blockade it, and more likely to destroy it. That's what happened in "Saving Private Ryan." A German Panzer Division was trying to take a bridge from the allies in Ramelle Germany. Private Ryan was part of a small contingency trying to defend a bridge.

¹ References to the text (NKJ) will not be cited in the sermon

Bridges are important in the kingdom of God, too. Doctor Walther, a father of American Lutheranism, used the concept of a bridge to teach an important truth. It goes like this: Imagine that on one side of the river is the salvation that Jesus won. There, on that side, is the cross and the empty tomb. On the other side of the river is the sinner. On the other side, the cross and empty tomb do not help the sinner. The sinner needs to be *connected* to them. The bridge that connects the sinner with the cross and empty tomb is word and sacrament ministry. Word and sacrament ministry *is* baptism, communion and preaching the gospel. They are pictured by font, pulpit and altar. They bring to you what Jesus won for you.

Part II

Now, the devil is not happy about that. He isn't, because you are on enemy ground, while in this life; and, the devil wants to protect his ground. So, he does what he can to destroy the bridge of word and sacrament ministry. *If* he can destroy the bridge, *then* he can keep God from delivering salvation *to you*.

That sort of thing happened to Israel, our text says. God sent preachers. Preachers preached the gospel. The gospel tapped on Israel's eardrums...it did, but Israel, by in large, did not take it to heart. It's not that they didn't hear, they did. It's not that they didn't understand, they

did. Its that they *didn't like* what they heard. They refused God stretched arms.

The fact of the matter was that Israel was duped by the devil. He had duped them to believe that the ministry of word and sacrament did not deliver their Savior, Jesus. He did by putting up the blockade of self-righteousness. So, Israel tried to span the divide to God *by* his own efforts.

There is nothing new under the sun. The devil's attempt to blockade the bridge is alive and well today. Consider a few examples.

In my travels to Minnesota this past week, I noticed a book called *Zealot* in the airport book stores. The book is a New York Times bestseller. The author is a defender of Islam and a popular guest on talk shows. His book is about Jesus. It claims that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are unreliable witnesses about Jesus and his purpose. Jesus' sole purpose, the book claims, was not to be Savior, but to free Israel from Rome. The way to God isn't through Jesus, but by being a good person.

The author of *Zealot* is a good example of our old Adam who has heard, who has understood, but refuses God's outstretched saving arms. He attempts to build his own bridge to God. He tries to bridge the gap by his own works. "If I do my best, God will accept me."

I am reminded of another way the old Adam tries to build his own bridge. Many years ago I visited a church that said I had to have a special gift of the Spirit to be a *better* Christian. I had to speak in tongues. If I did that, it would demonstrate that God was for me. It sounded good. So, I thought I would give it a try. I tried, I tried, and I tried. It never happened for me. I wondered if my faith was big enough; if, in fact, I had faith. It was a scary place to be.

In this way, too, our old Adam hears God gives grace in his word. He understands that the word of grace is certain. He does, but he refuses God's outstretched arms. He does by looking for certainty *within*. Is my faith big enough? Is it strong enough?

Consider one final example. Modern culture dangles decadent temptation before the old Adam. Much of modern culture uses smooth arguments to get us to think we can *safely* participate in sin. Culture says there is no wrong, embraces it, sanitizes it, glamorizes it; and, it writes us off as bigoted, if we believe differently.

So, our old Adam is deceived. Our old Adam hears. He understands sin is wrong. He understands God threatens with hell. He does, but he *doesn't want* to be left out...so, he turns a *deaf* ear to God's word. He is duped into believing that God permits sin, that sin does not divide from God.

Part III

This is man's predicament. He thinks he can reach God by ignoring sin; by looking for God within; by being a good person. He thinks he can erect his own bridges to God, but he can't. He is, by nature, like the blind man in today's gospel. The blind man could not see. There was nothing he could do to get it; nothing he could do to cross the bridge from blindness to sight.

That is true of everyone of us. None of us can cross the span to God. None of us can get to God by being good, by turning within, by excusing sin. We can't cross the bridge to God on our own. We can't, but our old Adam thinks he can. That is how *blind* our old Adam is.

When we end up there, the devil has done a good job of erecting barricades to God's bridge. That is his objective. It is to surround you, close the enemy ring around you, cut you off from God's bridge. By doing that he cuts you off from God; from salvation won.

Part IV

God will have *none* of that. He will not let the devil get the upper hand. So *God* spanned the sin that divides you from him. God did by becoming flesh. In the flesh, God spanned heaven and earth. Spanning heaven and earth, he stretched out his arms on the cross. There, God

gave his Son the sin the divides the sinner from God; your sin of trying to bridge the gap; of putting confidence in your goodness; of turning within to find God; of thinking your sin does not divide from God. Jesus paid for it in his death; and, then rose as proof that his payment was accepted.

It would do you now good, though, *if* you did not hear what God did for you. A deep chasm would keep you divided from God. So, God spans the divide *for you*, by *connecting* you with the cross and empty tomb. That is, word and sacrament *span the divide* between heaven and earth; between God and you. They *bring* to you and *deliver* to you, Jesus. They do by declaring to you, “Your sins are taken away. Jesus made you at one with God.” That's the voice of the gospel; the voice of Jesus.

The voice of Jesus gives faith. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.” Jesus word taps your eardrums. As it does, God creates and preserves your faith. It does *just as* the word gave the blind man sight.² Jesus commanded, “Go wash!” The man went and washed. He came back seeing. The blind man did not give sight to himself by being good, didn't get it by going within, didn't get it by ignoring his blindness. That would have been impossible. He needed something from *outside* himself – Jesus' word.

2 From Trinity 19 Gospel, John 9:1-11

In such a way word and sacrament come to you from outside of you; connect you to the *certainty* of the cross and empty tomb; span the divide to bring you salvation. Those words tap on *your* eardrums; eardrums that, by nature, are deaf to God's word. They give you ears to hear God's word; and hearing his word, faith to believe it.

It reminds me of those many years ago, when my faith was on shaky ground. Barricades had been erected to the word and sacrament ministry. They were when I was told I had to have a spiritual experience to have real faith. It took my pastor, who happened to be my dad, to put me on God's bridge; to give me the word of God outside of me. He patiently and gently gave me the certainty of the gospel. The gospel was certain in spite of me...and I was *comforted*.

Part V

Comfort; comfort is what you and I need when we are crushed by our sin. When we stress as to whether or not we are good enough; worry about whether or not we have had that spiritual experience; come face to face with the consequences of sin that we have tried to ignore, we will find no comfort from the bridges the devil tried to get us to erect. *None* of that gives you certainty. It only collapses and plunge you into the abyss of hell.

When we suffer pain in our lives from hurt – physical or emotional; are stressed from all the pressures put on us to make it in life; from man's inhumanity and life threatening disease in the news, we will be disappointed in the human props upon which the devil wants us to stand. *None* of them give you certainty, either. They, too, only will give out and leave you despairing.

Jesus doesn't. Jesus never fails. He took your sin away. He gives you heaven. He delivers it in word and sacrament. By means of word and sacrament, he wraps your hand of faith around him. He, Jesus, *is* certain. His word and sacrament *are* certain. They are because they are not something within you. They are what God did *outside* of you; backed up by the cross and empty tomb; backed up by God himself.

God, now, invites you to his table. Here he spans heaven and earth. In the earthly elements of bread and wine, the heavenly lies – God's body and blood. God comes to sinners, to you and me. God bridges the divide. He connects you to him. His body and blood, under the bread and wine, take away your sin. The devil can no longer keep you from God and out of heaven. His barricade is torn down. God is at one with you. The bridge of word and sacrament ministry is your

connection to God. Here God delivers heaven to you.
Amen!