

Lent 4B 2024
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March 10, 2024

Numbers 21:4-9 Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 Ephesians 2:1-10 John 3:14-21

“I don’t know.” I don’t know why God sent poisonous serpents to kill people. Some scholars write that the only reason the passage is still in the bible is that it is mentioned in John’s gospel. So those writers don’t know, either. I do know that we can learn a lot from this story. We find a correlation between the bronze serpent being lifted up and Jesus being lifted up on the cross. And that the way for us to live, even when life threatens to kill us, is to look to the cross, to Jesus, to God. From the psalmist, *“I lift up my eyes to hills, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”* And snakes. If only it weren’t a snake, right? Must it be a snake that saves the Israelites? Well, probably so. Our modern ears do not like snakes; various polls show that they are one thing that Americans fear the most. For us, they symbolize fear. We are not surprised at the cunning snake in the Garden of Eden. It figures, we nod. But for the Israelites, for the ancient world, snakes mostly symbolize life and fertility. Ancient ears are shocked at the serpent’s role in the garden. Then, in the desert, that God sends snakes to bite and kill a complaining people – that makes no sense to them, either. Something that brings life would now bring death. Unless ... we gaze up at this bronze thing on a stick. (And it was just last week that we were told not to worship idols....)

There is good news here. The Israelites ask Moses to pray, and to pray in a very specific way: *“pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.”* God does not remove the snakes. (Once again, we have no idea how God works.) God chooses not to eliminate that which causes the problem. Instead, God gives us ways to live through the calamities of our days. The serpents remain, and the people are given a way to live. A serpent crafted of bronze is put on a pole and when people are bitten, the people can look at the symbol, and live. How interesting that looking at our very problem gives us a way to live through it. With a total change in our perspective and complete reliance on God, God can heal us. Our adversities may not go away, but God will see us through them. We have a way to look beyond our present difficulty; that is, to turn to God and in so doing, to choose life.

The psalmist captures this passage from Numbers; we read just a few passages today, but the whole psalm has this refrain:

“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.”
We, then, are to *“give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.”*

So great is God’s love that:
John 3.16.

That’s all I have to say, right? We see “John 3.16” on bumper stickers, in songs, on former football player Tim Tebow’s face. We know the verse:

“For 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.”

The problem is that the “corporate we” may use this verse as if it is a phrase of exclusion, like this:

For God so loved the world that he sent his Son so that those who don’t have faith in him will **not** have eternal life.

To use this verse as one of exclusion is to ignore the mystery of God, the love of God, and the context of the verse itself. We remember that Jesus says these words to Nicodemus the Pharisee. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness, to ask questions of Jesus, the light of the world. We remember John’s gospel’s emphasis on light and dark, and all that might mean for this story of Nicodemus and Jesus. John’s gospel says that Jesus must be lifted up so that all may see him and have faith in him. We as Christians are supposed to lift up Jesus and show Jesus to the world in the way that act, speak, and live in this world. Through us, lifting up Jesus in our whole way of life, others will see and come to know Jesus. Verse 17 says that Jesus came to save the whole world, *not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*. How Jesus will bring the whole world to himself is a deep and abiding mystery. Nicodemus brings to light ... the light of the world, helping us understand that we in this world now, must show the world that what we do in lifting up Jesus comes from God. We could put John 3.17 on bumper stickers and athletes and project a powerful message to the world.

The Israelites did not have Jesus, yet as God’s chosen people they show us what it looks like to be loved by God. That there is a light, even at night, that guides us; that we are promised enough for this day only; and that we are not the only people that God loves. God loves everything and everyone, all created by God, with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Jesus, in communing with all the wrong people, shows us how to shine Christ’s light into the world. That is part of our baptismal covenant, again, initiated by God. We are called to respond to all that has been given to us.

God clearly is not finished bringing the world into one communion, one body of faith. We cannot imagine how God will do that, yet we remain faithful to God, faithful to Jesus, our savior. We know that God keeps God’s covenants, and in the fullness of time, God’s kingdom will truly inhabit the whole world. We pray for God to hurry up in bringing God’s will to “earth as in heaven;” to answer our prayers that all of creation may know the joy of new life, of love so strong that it overpowers death; of praises to God sung in all of creation. One day we will understand it all. Until then, we listen:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself.

And we pray:

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*