

Meditation – Light and Cross
Scripture Readings – Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:9-16
Sunday, March 10, 2024
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Numbers 21:4-9. We find the Israelites in the wilderness complaining to Moses and Yahweh about their circumstances. When faced with poisonous snakes, which are interpreted as Yahweh's punishment, Moses intervenes on their behalf. Hear now God's Holy word.

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses. "Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is John 3:9-16. Today we continue the conversation between Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to see Jesus by night. Following a conversation about being born anew and "of the spirit" Jesus refers to the need for the Son of Man to be lifted up like Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness. As we journey closer to Holy Week, our scripture readings begin to allude to what is ahead for Christ and shed light on the meaning of Christ's saving death on the cross. Hear now the Word of God.

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Amen.

The title of the meditation: Light and Cross

Text: And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...John 3:14

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, thank you for shedding light on the meaning of the cross through the gift of metaphor. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The image of serpents wrapped around a staff has long been lifted up as the symbol of the medical profession. Snake bites are generally bad news, and so the snake might seem ill-fitting for the symbol, yet this ancient emblem has been associated with healing since the 5th century BCE in the Mediterranean world where it developed.

The Greeks regarded snakes as sacred and used them in healing rituals to honor Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing. The snake's ability to shed its skin has been interpreted as a symbol of the circle of life, rebirth, healing and renewal. A snake can develop anti-venomous chemicals which protect itself against its own poison. Through the miracle of modern medicine, we also develop antibodies when exposed to the elements of an illness by way of vaccination.

In the Judea-Christian tradition, the serpent who confronted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden has long been connected to the underworld, not only because it crawls on the ground but also because it can bring death. Although the Hebrews interpreted the presence of the deadly snakes in the wilderness as God's punishment, Yahweh, the covenant-making God, created something new and life-giving out of an old symbol of death. The serpent, which brought evil into the Garden of Eden and which takes life relentlessly in the wilderness, became for the children of Yahweh a symbol of healing and grace.

We sometimes forget how God was perceived in the ancient world. For the most part, God was understood as One who was distant and cruel, needing to be appeased for life to be lived. The stories of our Judea-Christian faith seek to redefine this distant God as One who is life-giving and covenant-making. Beginning with the symbol of the rainbow (placing the weapon of a bow in the sky) after the Great flood, to the covenant with Abraham and Sarah who risked a journey with God, to the ten commandments presented to Moses as guideposts along the way. Now, in the symbol of a serpent lifted up, God responds with compassion and healing amid the dangers of the wilderness.

In our gospel reading, Jesus sheds light on his own destiny in a conversation which takes place at night. when he says to Nicodemus ...*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.* With these words, Jesus foreshadows the meaning of the cross. The cross, not unlike the serpent, was a symbol of death during the time of Christ. When Jesus was unjustly sentenced to die on the cross and he chose to embrace suffering he did not deserve, the cross, an old symbol of death, became something new, a symbol of healing and grace.

The cross is at the heart of our Christian faith, my friends! It is through the crucifixion, the lowest, most vulnerable moment in Christ's life, that Christ is exalted and lifted up. It is in the light of Christ's personal sacrifice and in Christ's encounter with humanity's cruelty that we get a glimpse into the heart of God.

Jesus suffered not because he was being punished. Jesus suffered because he was true to who He was and who God is. Jesus suffered because Jesus embodied the God who will not let us go, the

God who will not compromise the truth, and the God who will absorb the hostilities and pettiness of the world to save it.

I had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem a few years after my ordination. I remember the people I met, the places I saw, and the feelings I felt being in this precious Holy Land, today in so much peril as military conflict has led to millions of innocent people surrounded by death and suffering.

The pageantry I witnessed during my visit a few decades ago was unexpectedly underwhelming. I was longing for a religious experience at this time in my life and had hoped this journey would renew me. Perhaps, as a young minister, I was spending too many days inside the church I served to be moved by tourist destinations and ancient cathedrals.

However, there was no cathedral at the place of Golgotha, where Jesus died on a cross. Outside the inner wall of Jerusalem, next to the garbage dump stood the place where crucifixions were carried out. A public bus station now occupies this space. I was surprised, I had not expected it. As I stood overlooking an ordinary, public bus station, listening to a Muslim woman chanting in the background, I had my own encounter with God. I became overwhelmed with a sense of awe, wonder, and gratitude for this One who died a criminal's death on that hillside 2000 years ago and the One who captured my heart as a little girl. This One, who has illuminated so much for me over the years is still at the heart of all we value and believe.

Today, as we continue our annual walk toward Holy Week together, we pause for nourishment at the table of communion in a moment of remembrance. In the light of the cross, we find strength to face our own suffering, disappointments, fears, and anxieties. We intellectually know God did not send these dangers to punish us; however, we sometimes feel punished in our hearts when these serpents are right in front of us.

May we be faithful to who we are, face those challenges, and lift them up to God. When we have the courage to do so, the God of the rainbow and of the cross leads us through these dark shadows to a place of healing and light! Amen.