

Sermon – The Paradox of the Cross  
Scripture Readings – Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:1-16  
Sunday, March 15, 2015  
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Our first scripture reading is Numbers 21:4-9. We find the Israelites in the wilderness complaining to Moses and Yahweh about their circumstances. They do not have the patience and faith to endure the trials of their wilderness experience. When they are faced with the very real danger of poisonous snakes, which are interpreted in the text as being sent from Yahweh as a punishment, Moses intervenes on their behalf in prayer. In some ancient cultures, serpents were associated with gods because they have the power to destroy. The serpents in today's text have a dual capacity. These serpents have the power to destroy, and yet faith in the bronze serpent crafted by Moses has the power to save. The bronze serpent becomes a visible symbol of God's power to heal. 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.*

Our second scripture reading is John 3:1-16. We find Nicodemus, a Pharisee, coming to see Jesus by night. He is obviously drawn to Jesus and has great respect for him, which was a cause for inner conflict as a leader within Judaism and the need to visit Jesus in secret, in the dark. Following a conversation about being born anew and "of the spirit" Jesus makes reference to the need for the Son of Man to be lifted up like Moses lifted up 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 provide some insight into the paradox of the cross. Hear now the Word of God.

*1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 "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. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "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.*

The title of the sermon: The Paradox of the 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 being willing to enter into suffering and make personal sacrifices for the world you love. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The image of serpents wrapped around a staff is a familiar one in the medical field, decorating pharmaceutical packaging and hospitals alike. Snake bites are generally bad news, and so the animal might seem ill-fitting as the symbol of the medical profession, but this ancient emblem has been associated with curing since the 5<sup>th</sup> 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. Snakes have developed anti-venomous chemicals which protect them against their own poison. Through the miracle of modern medicine, we can develop antibodies when exposed to the elements of an illness through vaccination. Possessing both healing and poisonous properties is true of medicines *today*, as many of us who practice medicine or who have persevered treatments, understand too well.

The serpent, who confronted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, has long been connected with the underworld, not only because it crawls on the ground, but also because it can bring death. On the other hand, the ability of the snake to shed its skin has been interpreted as a symbol of the circle of life, rebirth and renewal. And so this symbol of healing is not without an element of paradox.

Today as we continue our Lenten journey and walk toward Holy Week, we come across another reference to a serpent lifted up, this time by Moses to bring healing to the Israelites following the Exodus around 1300 BCE. This event would certainly predate Greek mythology and be a source for the association of a single snake and staff with healing.

I think sometimes we 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 in order 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 and re-naming of Abraham and Sarah, to the laws of the heart presented at Mount Sinai to the covenant community ...and now, in the healing symbol of a serpent lifted up, God responds with compassion and healing.

In our gospel reading for today, Nicodemus, a religious leader gets who Jesus is and seeks him out. In a conversation which takes place after dark, Jesus sheds light on his own destiny when he says...*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...*With these words, Jesus gives us a glimpse of the meaning and paradox of the cross. The bronze serpent Moses raised up became a symbol of God's healing and grace. Yahweh, the covenant making God creates something new and life giving out of an old symbol of destruction. The serpent, which symbolizes evil in the Garden of Eden and takes life relentlessly in the wilderness, becomes for the children of Yahweh a symbol of healing and grace.

The cross, not unlike the serpent, was a symbol of destruction during the time of Christ. In was a means of death for the common criminal. When Jesus was unjustly sentenced to die on the cross and he chose to embrace it and enter into suffering that was not his own and that he did not deserve, the cross became, for those who believe, a symbol of healing and grace.

The cross is at the heart of the Christian faith, my friends! It is in the crucifixion, the lowest, most vulnerable moment in Christ's life, that Christ is exalted and lifted up. It is in Christ's personal sacrifice, in Christ's experience of the injustice and cruelty of humanity that we get yet another 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 in order to save it.

Following four years in ordained ministry, I had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem (as a part of a study leave). I remember many incidents on this trip: the people I met, the places I saw and the feelings I felt being in this Holy City. I remember being disappointed by the lack of feeling at some of the traditional, highly ornate, religious sights. The pageantry of it all surprisingly left me feeling very little...if anything somewhat cynical. I think I was disappointed because I needed and longed for a religious experience at this time in my life and had hoped this journey would inspire me. Perhaps I had spent too many of my days inside the church to be moved by 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 occupied this space because important crossroads meet here. I was surprised, I had not expected it. And so as I stood overlooking that ordinary, dirty public bus station, and as I listened to a Muslim woman chanting in the background, I had my own encounter with God: wondering, grateful and a little confused about who this One was who died a criminal's death on that hillside 2000 years ago, the One I learned about as a little girl who changed my heart...and I realized that this one, Jesus of Nazareth, who has come to have different meanings for me as I have grown over the years, is still at the heart of all I value and believe.

Part of the paradox of my life as a minister is the less sure I am of the religion we have build around Christ, a religion we have sorely misused, the more convinced I am that Jesus was God's messenger and is my Messiah...

And that this annual walk toward Holy Week gives meaning and hope to each of our lives. We are invited to face our fears, our anxieties and we are invited to face the dangers, which intellectually we know God did not send to punish us but which we sometimes feel in our heart of hearts, especially when they are right in front of us. We are invited to face them, to look them straight in the eye and to lift them up to God.

When we have the courage to do this; the covenant making, life-giving God of the rainbow and the cross leads us through those dark shadows to a place of light and healing! And this, my friends, is the paradox of the cross. Amen.