

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
March 14, 2021- 4th Sunday of Lent, B
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

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

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3.14). †

Today's Gospel message is perhaps one of the most famous, most well known passages in Christian scripture... the 'hallmark' of our faith, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...' I'd like to share three brief reflections about all of today's readings with you.

I'm not sure if you'll understand, but in the past few months, I've felt like that character Bill Murray played in "Ground Hog Day"— that film from year ago, in which the character woke up to do the same thing over and over again. Over the past year of COVID restrictions (both at work and at home), each day it felt exhausting to simply get up in order to be isolated and do nothing interesting, nothing different from the previous day... Its taxing on both body and mind!

So, consider that very strange OT story we heard from the Book of Numbers, about the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness, having doubted God and complained against God, waking to the same old stuff... only to find themselves afflicted by poisonous serpents. I have to say, *that* God of the wilderness seems in many ways dangerous and unpredictable, and yet YHWH was always present and faithful to the people. God saved the people, but not in the way they had asked for or expected. Notice that the people begged Moses to pray that God would take away the poisonous serpents. And Moses, the intermediary, prayed and received instruction to fashion a bronze serpent onto a staff, and anyone who was bitten, if they looked upon it and turned their thoughts to God, would be healed... we are told, they were.

The deliverance the people received was not exactly what they had in mind. They had asked that God rid them of the snakes, that God take away the serpents. Instead, God provided a method by which those who were bitten and suffering could be cured.

In much the same way, God sent Jesus into our world not to take away the pain in the world, but to save and grant eternal life to those who believed in God and God's ways. God works in ways that are different than the ways we might choose for ourselves... yet still saves us.

Second, consider the language used in both stories, where there is 'lifting up'... the lifting up of the bronze serpent and the lifting up of Jesus. Both are symbols that magically transform those who look upon them, as long as they trust in and believe in God. The author of John's Gospel is very skilled here: when Jesus speaks of his own lifting-up, the Greek word (ὑψωθῆναι) has double meaning. It means to lift up, foreshadowing Jesus being lifted upon the Cross... and it *also* means 'to exalt.'

Jesus tells his disciples that he will be exalted. In John's Gospel, when Jesus is lifted upon the Cross, that is the point of his Glorification! If Jesus had not agreed to being lifted onto the Cross, then there would be no glory.

In the same way, for those who truly believe in and trust Jesus, it's only if they embrace the Cross, that they find salvation. This 'lifting up' is not about embracing the status quo. For, as we heard last week, the Cross made no sense to those who aspired to power and conformed to human ideas about salvation, indeed, the whole concept of the Cross and the Crucifixion was even a stumbling block for the Disciples and the early Church. This notion of 'lifting up' reminds us that the life that God promises is not necessarily a life we might design ourselves. It's not a life of security and self-interest, it involves the Cross— it involves being hurt, and struggling, and perhaps experiencing pain, while still being willing to trust in God. It involves being willing to lose everything, in order to attain eternal life. Deliverance and salvation often come in ways that we don't expect or plan on. For the Israelites in the wilderness, though they were cured and saved, they still got bitten! For those of us today, it's clear that Jesus did not solve all of the problems of the world— in addition to the 'great plague' of COVID 19, there's still hunger, illness, violence, and all manner of evil.

God did not rid the world of evil through Jesus but showed us how to conquer evil with self-less love. For those of us willing to accept the loving gift from God, those willing to believe in God's only Son, Jesus, and accept his teachings and follow his ways... we might become the means to cure illness, stop violence and help those in need. This is what Paul is saying to the Ephesians, it's not about our ways, it's about God's ways. And without the Cross, there can be no glory!

Third, and lastly, consider love. "For God so loved the world..." God's love is not like our own, it's all-encompassing and is meant for everyone. We often speak of the quality of God's love for us as 'unconditional.' St. Augustine once said, 'God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love.' We are told God sent the only Son, so that no one would perish, but all have life eternal. There is also a qualification here, the requirement that we believe in Jesus, the Son of Man.

One of my favorite American theologians and preachers is Phillips Brooks, a former Bishop of Massachusetts, once wrote: "Power, no matter how well-intentioned, tends to cause suffering. Love, being vulnerable, absorbs it. In a point of convergence on a hill called Calvary, God renounced the one for the sake of the other." I pray each of us has the courage to do the same!

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him (and follows him) may not perish but have eternal life' (Jn3.16).

Do you believe?

