

## SERUM OF LIFE

4 Lent – B     March 11, 2018

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

This morning I'm wearing a cross that was given to me as a gift some years ago. What makes it different from my other crosses is that it's a crucifix: a cross bearing the image of Jesus. Back in my growing up days, wearing a crucifix was considered to be a "Catholic" thing that most Protestant denominations simply did not do. A lot of years have gone by. In seminary we had a processional cross that held the image of Jesus, particularly during Lent; which, at other times was removed, with pegs inserted to mark the places for Jesus' head, feet, and hands.

We do not have any rules about whether a plain cross or a crucifix should be used. Either is appropriate; context should be our guide.

With that in mind, we hear words from Jesus in John's gospel that suggest, prophetically, that Jesus will be lifted up on the cross, much as Moses lifted up a bronze serpent, centuries before, in the wilderness. Wearing the image of Jesus on the cross seems very appropriate for this day.

Conveniently, if you wouldn't have otherwise recalled the context of Jesus' example, the people who put together the lectionary calendar of readings were careful to link the account from Numbers with this morning's gospel. That said, our first reading is more than a convenient link to the gospel, but also a reminder of the purpose of "lifting up." While we might have some discomfort with the idea of God filling the area with poisonous snakes as punishment for the people grumbling, we have no quarrel with the antidote. The pole with the bronze serpent is lifted up, and those who were bitten will live.

Like the lifting up of the pole with the serpent, God doesn't eliminate every possible danger, but rather allows the people to live in the midst of the danger. Likewise, we don't look to or wear the cross of Jesus to ward off evil, temptation, and dangers, but rather to enable us to live in the midst of that which life throws at us. We look at the cross as the power of God to bring healing to the world. Through the dying and raising of Jesus, God's work of showing his absolute love to the world is completed (which is actually the more accurate translation of Jesus' words from the cross: "It is completed [finished].") We look to the cross as the sign of the promise that nothing will ever be able to separate us from God's love.

People are sometimes quick to quote John 3:16, stressing the action of the believer as that which saves. But that misses the point of the verse immediately following: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Sometimes looking up at Jesus and believing takes time. That doesn't preclude God's saving activity. Nicodemus himself walks away, not yet understanding, not yet believing. Sometime later, though, it will be Nicodemus who comes to claim Jesus' body to assure him a proper burial.

We tend to look at the word "condemnation" as "damnation" – but the original language of the text along with its context refer more to exposing wrongs and being lost to our self-exclusion. Part of the problem is that we can't fathom God's mercy. The idolatry of "creating God in our own image" is that we believe God behaves the way *we expect God to behave*, which completely ignores letting God be God.

In the original language of our gospel reading, the word that translators have called “judgment” (*krisis*), is actually the root word for the English “crisis,” with the emphasis on the moment being a decisive turning point. Something has to happen. That makes it a *kairos* (God-time) moment. This is the turning point for healing to begin.

The season of Lent, with its emphasis on stepping back and taking stock of our lives opens us up to that opportune time. It’s the way for healing happens.

In our reading from Ephesians, the Apostle Paul reminded us: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

The Good News tells us that we can be made whole while facing the very things that bring our vulnerability to light. The snakebite becomes the metaphor for our human condition, whereby our only salvation comes through the grace of God. That is God’s gift to us: “For God so loved the world that he gave....” Amen.