

March 15, 2015 / Fourth Sunday in Lent / David L. Edwards

Looking Up to the Cross

Numbers 21:4-9 *...and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

Ephesians 2:1-10 *For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

John 3:14-21 *And 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.*

Lent is the season that prepares us for the message of the resurrection—God's power of new life in the midst of violence and death. As we move closer to Holy Week, the cross becomes central to our scripture readings and our reflections. What does it mean? Is it merely a somber symbol of agony and death? Is its only meaning and message that of a God who sacrifices a beloved child to, somehow, wipe out our sins? Given how the cross as a symbol of Christian religion has been, at times in the past and still today, yoked with nationalism, domination, and militarism, should we just abandon it? What I am sharing this morning arises out of my own personal struggle with the meaning of the cross and its misrepresentation and misuse. In spite of all the problems with the symbol and meaning of the cross, it has, from my youth, been THE most compelling and eloquent part of the Christian faith tradition. I will get to that by way of a brief journey through our readings for today.

The Book of Numbers is given a different name in the Hebrew, a word that means literally “in the wilderness”. The word is taken from the first sentence of the book: “The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai” (1:1). Numbers is the story of Israel's forty year journey, from liberation from slavery in Egypt, to Israel's arrival at the Jordan River, poised to enter the “land of the promise”. It is a story of people learning to trust God in all things as they make their journey. Our portion today is the last story of Israel's rebellion against Moses and God, the loss of faith and trust. They are weary. They have just lost their priest Aaron, who, you remember, made the golden calf for them when they got tired of waiting for Moses to come down from the top of Mt. Sinai with a word from God. Aaron, they probably felt, was

a bit more “on their side”.

The people “became impatient”. The literal meaning of this phrase in Hebrew is “their soul was shortened”. Their souls, their spirits had become short, small, cramped. Nothing was good enough for them, especially the food, which they think is “miserable”. Oh, isn't that the *manna* God had provided them at the beginning, when they again grumbled? (Ex. 12) We have all been there, or will be at some point. For whatever reasons, we become exhausted, frustrated, tired of things not “going our way”, and our spirits, our souls shrink. One writer puts it this way: “Having a 'short soul', indeed, means more than being impatient, it means being thoroughly discouraged. The people were depressed and cheerless”(Daily Study Bible). When we get that way, nothing suits us, everything looks bleak, and we lose our faith, our trust in anyone or anything, including God.

God, who also seems fed up, sends poisonous serpents which bite the people, some of whom die. The people come to Moses, realizing that their “short-soulness” has brought on their own misery, and confess their sin and ask him to pray to God to remove the snakes. God has Moses make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Everyone bitten who looks up to the serpent will live.

Now, there's a whole lot in this story to talk about! But let's just, for now, take it at face value. It seems to be a story of people, just like us, getting themselves into a mess by their own actions or dismal state of mind, or soul. We might say that God is in their suffering, potentially teaching them something. I don't want to get into the issue of a God who would send snakes to bite people! I take the snakes as symbolic of the pain we experience when our “souls become short”, when we grow impatient, dissatisfied, despondent, or whatever, and our view of life becomes distorted. But the story is also about God's being in the healing, the rescuing, the return to our right minds and spirits, so that we once again have “lengthened souls”. A return to trust, to faith—the words mean the same thing. It is about living with openness to God and trust in God's love and leading and ways. It is also, I think, about our seeing in our sufferings, our struggles, the source of our healing. If we really believe that God is that sacred presence and power that is everywhere and in everything, including our experiences, then it makes perfect sense that God is present in our “snake bites” in a way that can bring us greater wholeness—which is the true meaning of salvation. I've known it in my own life. I think some of you have also.

The reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians echoes these themes. The writer is speaking to Gentile Christians, non-Jews who became followers of Jesus. You once were dead—meaning spiritually dead, or with “shortened souls”—because you were caught up in the

“spirit of the age”. You were living according to “desires of the flesh and senses”, says the writer. This does not necessarily mean sexual matters or even eating too much! For Paul, “fleshly” existence was buying into the values in the culture around us, the “spirit of the age”. What is that for us today? Different people might give different answers. But to my mind it would include materialism, consumerism (trying to make ourselves feel good by owning stuff), economic and political greed and power, self-centeredness rather than seeking the good of all, including the natural world, and violence, the worship of guns, war, and fighting our enemies. All of the things, in fact, that contradict the core teachings of Jesus. We absorb and become absorbed by these things. Nearly everything around us—families, education, the business world, even religion when it, too, mirrors the culture—infuses our minds and souls with these “spirits”. We become spiritually dead, and we are not even sure how we got that way.

The writers' message is that God does not leave us in that state. The fullness of God's love offers a way out, a way into life again. In the life, teachings, and, yes, death of Jesus, the writer believes, God was present in a way that loved us back to our true selves. The foundation of it all is grace, God's free offering of love even and especially when we have gotten lost from what is most real and true and good and life-giving. It is simply there for us to embrace, to accept. We do not, and cannot, earn God's love by doing good things. But then, when we are, in the writer's words, “created” or “re-created” in Jesus, we cannot help but do good works. It is our truest nature, the one we forgot when we were mired down in discouragement or spiritual deadness or whatever. We become again who God made us to be—those who, in response to God's love, cannot help but do good things in and for the world.

For me, all of this was pulled together in the reading from John's gospel. There Jesus says, as he foresees his death perhaps, that in the same way Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man will be lifted up so that whoever believes in—looks up to—him may have eternal life. “Lifted up” can mean both being lifted up on the cross and being lifted up as one in whom we see God's love for us, and in whom we see our true humanity. That is exactly where John goes with it. For now we hear the most famous words in Christian scriptures: “God so loved the world [or, loved the world so much], that God gave the only son, so that everyone who believes in[looks up to] him may not perish[be spiritually dead or asleep] but may have eternal life.” God's love—not hate, not anger, not desire to punish. If we want to speak of the will of God, it is only the will to “save” [*sodzo*=heal, deliver, save, keep safe, preserve, make well]. By “world”, the writer means the human world that gets so lost from what really matters, what brings life instead of death and suffering.

Here, then, is the image of looking up to the cross, seeing death, yes, but also Life. Eternal life, which does NOT mean getting out of this world and going to heaven. It means not a duration of life, but a quality of life. In John's gospel, eternal life means “the very life by which God lives” (Raymond Brown). It means our sharing in and living by the very life of God, and for John's gospel, that means the love of God, who IS love.

The meaning of the word “believe” is also important. In Christian scriptures, “believe” and “faith” are the same word (*pistis*). It does not mean “believing” doctrines or ideas. It does not mean being intellectually convinced of something, some proof. In this passage from John's gospel, believe has the sense of “looking up” and receiving and trusting God's presence and love in Jesus, a presence and love that awakens us to our true, God-created selves. A presence and love that are always there, simply to be received so that they become the foundation and wellspring of our living.

“Believing in Jesus” means looking to him as he calls us to follow in the way of true life. It means entrusting our lives in that direction.

This is where I began to see the cross once more in the same light with which I have seen the cross since I was young. Being a minister's son, I grew up in the church, mostly in southwestern Virginia. I heard plenty about God sacrificing “his” son so that our sins would be forgiven and we could go to heaven. Well, I wasn't interested in the next life. I loved this life, even with its struggles and so forth. The so-called Atonement theology, that Jesus “had to” die to “atone” or suffer for our sins, made no sense to me. It never grabbed me. But the cross did. I was fortunate to have a father who spoke of the cross in a way that made sense and was compelling. It was a story not just of Jesus' suffering and death, but his life, his teachings, his call to follow him in the life of loving with God's own love. The cross was a symbol for the kind of life which calls forth our truest self, the self that gives itself in service to others and the world, the self that finds itself by losing itself, that is, the smaller, self-centered, and insecure self. I am finally clear about this, that the cross is not a symbol of a religion—that's where we went wrong--but of a way of life that I have seen in many, many people through the years. Some thought of themselves as Christian, some not.

I was reading this week that when a very small child looks at something, you will notice that her head follows her eyes. In fact, it is almost as though the child's whole body attends in the direction the eyes are looking. I thought of that with regard to the readings today. Looking up to the serpent and being saved, or healed. Looking to, or up to, the Son of Man being lifted up. That is not a bad image for faith or belief, in the biblical meaning of the words. It is the inclining of our whole being toward Jesus, toward God. As as we do that, we

are lifted out of, as it were, the ways of living and thinking that do not really bring life, either to ourselves or to others. Looking up to the cross, for me, I remember the deepest, most powerful and real kind of love—the love that is willing to suffer for the sake of others, for the sake of one's own spiritual growth, for the sake of something greater than and beyond oneself. And in that, on that journey, we will experience resurrection, new life, and greater wholeness.