

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Lent
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

March 22, 2009

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

Lift up your eyes, and live

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” (John 3:14)

The Fourth Sunday of Lent goes by many names. Among Roman Catholics, it is traditionally known as Laetare Sunday, from the opening words of the Latin Mass that are used on this day, “Laetare, Jerusalem” -- “Rejoice, Jerusalem.” Among Anglicans, today is often called Refreshment Sunday. Whatever you call it, today marks the mid-point of Lent. We are more than halfway through this season of repentance and self-examination, and we know where we are heading -- toward the joy of Easter.

So I find it interesting that on this Sunday for refreshment, this Sunday for rejoicing, our assigned readings from Hebrew Scripture and from the Gospels focus directly or indirectly on the cross. These two passages are in fact the same ones that we hear in September on Holy Cross Day. We may associate the cross with a lot of things, but I don’t expect that the first thing that springs to mind is “refreshment” or “rejoicing.” So what is that about? Can we find refreshment in the cross?

In the first reading, which is from the Book of Numbers, the people are wandering in the wilderness. They have escaped from slavery in Egypt but have not yet reached the Promised Land, and they are impatient and tired and losing trust in God. Sure, God has taken care of them again and again along the way. When they grew hungry, God gave them a mysterious kind of bread called manna that fell during the night with the dew. When they became thirsty, God made water gush out for them from a rock. But the people are fretful and rebellious, full of discontent, and now, in the last of a long series of complaint stories, the people rail not only against Moses but also against God. Later on, the Psalms will look back fondly on manna as being “the bread of angels” (Psalm 78:15), but to the people wandering in the wilderness it is wretched, boring stuff, and they announce to Moses, “we detest this miserable food” (Numbers 21:5).

At this point the Lord gets angry at their persistent complaints and sends “poisonous serpents” that bite and wound and even kill many people. The wanderers quickly repent and appeal to Moses to pray for them. Moses prays and the Lord relents – though not by making the snakes disappear, but by giving the people a practice or discipline that overcomes the power of the snake. God tells Moses what he needs to do, and Moses carries out God’s instruction: he makes a serpent of bronze and puts it up on a pole, “and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live” (Numbers 21:9). This story, by the way, is the source of the medical symbol of a snake on a pole.

You might ask, what do our ancestors see when they look up at that bronze serpent? They see what most frightens them, what most disgusts and appalls them, the thing that is hurting and killing them. They see a terrifying reminder of suffering and death. They also see a reminder of their own sin, for the reason the snakes came upon them in the first place is because the people were rebelling against God. Snakes, in fact, are a biblical image of sin. Just think of Eve, tempted by the trickster snake in the Garden of Eden, or of Jesus denouncing the scribes and Pharisees as “snakes” and a “brood of vipers” (Mt 23:33). In the Book of Revelation, the Devil himself is called “that ancient serpent” (Rev. 20:2).

So, as the people gaze on the serpent of bronze, they see an image of death. They see an image of sin. They contemplate their broken relationship with God. And they see something else, too: they see the boundless goodness and mercy of God, because they instantly understand that a power greater than snakes and sin has set this image before them. As they gaze on this fearful thing that God has lifted up before their frightened, guilty eyes, they are restored to life. They are healed and made whole.

I wonder if this act of gazing may be a kind of spiritual analogue to homeopathy, the practice in alternative medicine of treating a patient by exposing the patient to a tiny dose of a substance that in large quantities would produce the very symptoms from which the patient needs to be healed. Or maybe we can compare the story to smallpox vaccinations: doctors inoculate their patients against the disease by giving patients a dose of a live virus from the same family as smallpox. Or think of the announcement earlier this week of a small study that showed that when scientists gave children who were highly allergic to peanut butter a tiny amount of peanut flour every day, the children’s sensitivity to peanuts gradually decreased, and a few children were even healed of the allergy. Whatever your opinion of homeopathy or vaccinations or the best way to deal with peanut allergies, my point is that maybe they give something of a

physical analogue to the spiritual truth that this story conveys: God lifts up for the people an image, an icon, of what frightens and could actually kill them, and in the act of what we might call contemplative gazing, the people are healed.

Now set this story beside the passage in the Gospel of John. Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, has come to Jesus by night to meet this man who has from God. In explaining why he has come, Jesus mentions the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness, and declares that he, too, will be lifted up in order to show God's boundless, steadfast love for the world. For Christians, it is Jesus lifted up on the cross that conveys our healing. When we gaze at the cross of Christ, we see everything that we are afraid of, everything that is sinful and broken and shameful and spoiled, and at the very same time we also see God's perpetual, outpouring love for the world.

I don't know how many of you spend time gazing at the cross, apart from Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Only some of us carry a cross in our pocket or on a necklace around our neck. Fewer still have placed a cross on a wall at home, maybe because of not wanting to look morbid or not wanting to seem embarrassingly pious. But the pair of readings this morning point to the healing power of gazing at the cross. Today's Gospel tells us that Jesus was "lifted up [so] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:15). And as Jesus says later in John's Gospel: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people (all things) to myself" (John 12:32).

So what do we see when we look at the cross? We see everything we are afraid of. Most of us want to live out a comfortable life and not suffer when we die. We want to live what we think of as our allotted fourscore years and ten – or maybe more. We want to die peacefully in our beds, with our loved ones standing by and murmuring nice things. When we look at Jesus dying an agonizing death on the cross, we look squarely at suffering and death, at violence and torture, at rejection and humiliation, at poverty and helplessness – at everything, in fact, that frightens us and does us harm. And we see that all of it has been taken up by Jesus, that all of it has been embraced by God. There is nowhere we can go, nothing that we can experience, that God in Christ does not share with us. Even our sin, even our willfulness, self-centeredness, and greed, our impatience and envy, our laziness and despair – all of that, and more, is met on the cross by the love of God, by the one who says, "Father, forgive."

Christ came down to earth and was lifted up on the cross for our healing, so that we too could be set free from the fear of death, free from the

grip of sin, and raised to new life in him. Every time we lift our eyes to the cross, we have a chance to hand over our fears, to confess our sins, and, through the grace of God, to begin to live no longer for ourselves alone, but for the one who lived and died and rose for us. That is refreshment, indeed. That is reason to rejoice. No wonder we call this Refreshment Sunday!

As we move through these last weeks of Lent, I invite us, as a spiritual practice, to turn to the cross whenever we feel afraid or overwhelmed, tempted or confused, whenever we need again to take in the healing love of God. Let me also add that there is particular power in remembering the cross just now, because we are all living in a time of extraordinary turbulence. As Rob mentioned in his sermon last week, writer Thomas Friedman recently quoted a business expert who dubbed this chaotic time as the beginning of the so-called Great Disruption.¹ Friedman argues that historians will look back on the year 2008 as the year that a civilization based on living beyond its financial means and living beyond its ecological means finally hit the wall.

Set this crisis in the light of the cross, and we understand it as a moment of judgment, a moment of reckoning. Our society's recent way of living – what the Episcopal bishops of this Church decry in their new pastoral letter as “unparalleled corporate greed and irresponsibility, predatory lending practices, and rampant consumerism”² – is not a way of living that is in any way close to the cross. As a society, we are all being invited into Lent, into a season of self-examination and repentance. I hope that in prayer we will bring not only ourselves to the cross, but our country, as well, so that what needs to die can die, and what needs to be transformed, can be transformed, and that together we can find healing, and be renewed, and discover a path to new life.

¹Phrase by Paul Gilding, as quoted by Thomas L. Friedman, “The Inflection Is Near?” *New York Times*, March 7, 2009.

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/opinion/08friedman.html>]

² “A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Episcopal Church” meeting in Hendersonville, North Carolina, March 13-18, 2009 to the Church and our partners in mission throughout the world.

[http://www.episcopalchurch.org/79901_106036_ENG_HTM.htm]