

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

When I was a little girl, my Daddy used to call me Calamity Jane...because, he said, if anything was going to happen to one of the children, it would happen to Elizabeth. As my life unfolded, I realized that those words from my Dad were the most prophetic words ever spoken about me. There's been great joy in my life, but there has also been tragedy that was not the result of regrettable actions on my part, but seemed to appear out of nowhere and for no apparent reason. There's an expression for people who seem to be plagued by misfortune. We refer to them as being snakebit. And all of us in one way or another are snakebit. We are broken people living in a broken world.

Our gospel lesson this morning is the continuation of a conversation that Jesus is having with the Pharisee Nicodemus. Now Nicodemus is an intelligent man and a curious man and he has come to Jesus in the dark of night because he sees something intriguing in Jesus and he wants to know more, but he doesn't want to be discovered. He listens intently to Jesus, but as well-educated as he is, he tends to interpret all that Jesus says literally. He doesn't understand Jesus' explanation of being born-again by water and the Spirit. And he doesn't understand when Jesus refers to the Son of God being lifted up just as the bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole by Moses in the wilderness. He's a student of the Torah, the Jewish Bible, so he knows this story well, but he doesn't get the connection.

To understand what Jesus means when he alludes to that Old Testament story we need to take a closer look. We just heard that story this morning in the Old Testament lesson. We find the children of Israel still wandering in the wilderness and complaining vehemently to God about their predicament: not enough water and food that tastes terrible. And then they are invaded by poisonous snakes who kill people with their venomous bites. They plead with Moses to intercede for them with God and make the snakes disappear. God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and place it on a pole so that it can be lifted up for everyone to see. When those who are bitten gaze up at the bronze snake on the pole, they are saved from dying. It's interesting to note that God did not remove the snakes, but did provide an antidote in the midst of them...a way for people to be saved from dying even though the snakes were still with them. It's an unusual story and one that made an impression on the Israelites. They kept the bronze serpent on the pole and when they reached the Promised Land and built the Temple, they placed it inside and it became an idol until 250 years later when King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4) removed it for exactly that reason.

For Jesus to make reference to this story in talking about himself is a mystery to Nicodemus. Nicodemus has come to Jesus in the dark, just as we do. As time unfolds and Nicodemus sees more of Jesus and hears more about Jesus he moves into the light...enough so that he is one of the ones who claims Jesus' body after the crucifixion and arranges for a suitable burial place. Coming into the light of Christ from the darkness is not always an instantaneous event. Most of the time, it's very gradual and happens over time. But the goal for all of us is to move out of the darkness and into the light that Christ brings.

While talking to Nicodemus, Jesus explains that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have everlasting life. Just as the Israelites were instructed to gaze upon the serpent on the pole to save their lives, we are instructed to gaze upon Jesus on the cross to save ours. The bronze snake was lifted up so that all who had been snakebit could gaze upon it and be saved. Jesus is lifted up so that all who gaze upon him and recognize who he is can be saved.

We are all snakebit. We are broken people living in a broken world. We get snakebit regularly. We get bitten by the cruel actions of others; by circumstances beyond our control; by the hurtful words from people we want to love; by illness and by death and by separation. We wander in the wilderness on our way to the Promised Land often losing hope that we will ever reach it. When have you been snakebit? Was it something that somebody said? Or something that somebody did that left you wounded? Was it when you lost someone who was dear to you? Was it when someone your trusted cheated you? Was it when you had an illness that brought your life to a screeching halt? When has the pain of living in this world been more than you thought you could bear? When have you longed for some relief? Our souls are continuously wounded...sometimes mortally. We know when our souls are dying when we become bitter and resentful...when we strike back...when we pay back... when we turn our backs.

There is a way out. Gaze upon Jesus on the cross and see your salvation. Jesus lifted up is the remedy for all the snakebites that we endure and all the wounds to our soul. Gazing upon Jesus lifted up keeps our souls alive.

For God loved the world in this way...that he gave his only Son to build a bridge for us to cross to be reconciled to God. Anyone who has ever had a child or loved a child as one of their own knows the extent of that kind of love. We might lay down our own life to save our child, but would we voluntarily give up our child in an act of love for others? It's hard to imagine. That's what God did for us. That's how much God loves his creation and wants his creation to be saved and reconciled to him. Have any of us ever been loved that much in this life? It's hard to comprehend. It's hard to take in. It's hard to process. Sometimes it's hard to believe.

John 3:16 may be the most well-known Biblical address ever and many people know what it says. We see it on bumper stickers and keychains, t-shirts and placards. It is the soundbite for

Christian faith. This is the Good News. But to believe this Good News is more than just 'believing in Jesus.' It also means that we are trusting in Jesus...trusting in God. It's not just about believing in something that happened 2000 years ago, but it is trusting in Jesus today in such a way that we allow Jesus to transform us and to transform our lives by our encounter with him.

Placing our trust in this Jesus means confronting the inconvenient truth that God's purposes for those God loves are not synonymous with our own common-sense values of happiness, health, and safety. The "lifting up" of Jesus reminds us that the true life God has promised us is not the life that we can secure for ourselves through self-interest and caution. We are not in charge. No matter how well we plan or how careful we are, we have less control over our lives than we want to believe. And we cannot provide or own safety for our immortal souls.

We need also to remember that the new life that Jesus offered during his ministry was particularly hard for the religiously faithful in his day. As modern day Christians are we willing to examine honestly the ways we allow history and tradition to interfere with the our being able to recognize the new life that Jesus is offering us and what Jesus is asking of us? Do our traditions and rituals become a stumbling block for us in responding to Jesus in the way he has asked?

The pole with the bronze snake was lifted up in the wilderness for all to gaze upon it and be saved. In another wilderness...the wilderness of humanity, high on a hill outside the holy city, God himself was lifted up on the pole. Once for all. So that all those who know they are dying in the wilderness can be saved from dying in their souls.

We are all snakebit. Look up at him and live...in the wilderness that is still filled with serpents...for he is your salvation today and for all time. Just look up and gaze upon him. He is the antidote for what would kill our souls.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.