

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

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Lifting Up Our Hearts

We are deep in our Lenten journey. This space of forty days mirrors the amount of time Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism and the forty years Moses and the ancient Israelites spent wandering around in the desert. Lent is a liminal space we enter into when we set time aside from our daily routine to simply be with God. We are also invited to use this holy time to get in touch with the neglected, unknown, or simply forgotten places of our soul where our fears and suffering often hide in the shadows.

Whether we spend this time in prayer, quiet reflection, or simply being still in the presence of the Holy One, we affirm our fundamental need to be part of something bigger and better than ourselves; to be connected to God and to each other in a deep and meaningful way. Jesus teaches us that the portal into these vital relationships is through love, accepting God's unconditional love for ourselves and loving God and neighbor in return. This is the way to salvation, where we are healed and made whole by God's extravagant self-giving act of love. Isn't this what we all yearn for?

In the verses leading up to today's gospel reading we are introduced to Nicodemus, a much respected Pharisee, who seeks Jesus out under the cover of darkness, risking his reputation as well as his personal safety. He sees Jesus as truly a man of God and is hungry to know more. Jesus responds to his questions with the strange and mysterious story of Moses lifting up a bronze snake on a pole for Israelites to look upon to ward off the deathly bite of the serpent. Of course, Nicodemus would be very familiar with this story since he is a scholar of the Torah. However, what Jesus says next completely confuses him. Jesus says that he too will be lifted up and all who believe in him will not perish. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:14-16). No doubt this is one of the best known verses in the Bible and seen on a placard at almost every sporting event or end zone. Often, it is misunderstood and used to judge and condemn others. So, do we really understand what Jesus is saying?

To gain some insight into the coupling of these strange passages from both the Hebrew Bible and John's Gospel we need a broader context of what compelled God to instruct Moses to attach a bronze serpent to a pole for all to see. The ancient Israelites are not a happy lot. They have wandered in the desert, grumbling about being thirsty and hungry since they left Egypt to escape a life of slavery. This is the last of the five

“murmuring” events where the people rail against Moses, who intercedes each time to save them from the wrath of God who is losing patience with their ingratitude and threats to abandon the entire exodus. How quickly they have forgotten how God provided water gushing out of a rock, manna from the heavens and quails that fell from the sky, all to quench for their thirst and fill their empty stomachs. Yet, the Israelites still complain of having no food or water. However, this time they have gone too far. Instead of just railing against Moses for his incompetent leadership, they also speak out against God.¹

Suddenly, the ground on which they stand is crawling with slithering, venomous snakes coming from every direction. Their victims die instantly. Terrified, the people quickly repent and ask Moses to intercede with God to save them. God responds by instructing Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten must look up upon the serpent in order to live.

This is the stuff of nightmares, not only for the Israelites but also for us today, especially those of us who abhor snakes! A recent poll revealed that 36% of Americans consider snakes their number one fear.² So what is God up to, sending such frightening and lethal creatures to terrify his people? To make it even more confusing the Hebrew word for fiery (poisonous) serpent is *seraph*, the same angelic creatures that attend to God in heaven.³ On the surface this sounds a lot like idolatry or a form of magic. This is much more about magic or icons. God is inviting the Israelites to courageously lift up their hearts to God and to stare into the very thing they fear most.⁴ Curiously, it is in admitting and confessing their sins that they find wholeness and healing in the *seraph*, the fiery serpent sent by God that is the source of both death and life.

Jesus uses this strange image of the raised bronze serpent to explain that he, too, will be raised up. In time the cross, the instrument of Jesus’ excruciating death, will become the symbol that points to his resurrection, the promise of eternal life. Much like the ancient Israelites God asks us to come face to face with our brokenness, losses and tragedies. Ironically, it is in lifting up our hearts and facing our fears we find the path toward healing and wholeness, becoming our true selves.

It takes raw courage to place our complete trust in God, made flesh on the cross in the person of Jesus because it goes so much against the grain of our culture. However, Jesus assures us that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). The judgment Jesus speaks of is one of crisis and not punishment.⁵ This is a vital distinction. Having been given the gift of free will, we can refuse God’s love and continue to stay in the darkness, living in spiritual crisis, holding onto our fears, making them like an idol, burdened by its sheer dead weight. Or, we can choose to move out of the dark shadows of shame and

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2*, eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 99 – 101.

² Taylor, 101.

³ Taylor, 101.

⁴ Taylor,

⁵ David Lose,

fear into the light. It requires us to be vulnerable, trusting God's unfathomable love as we lift up our hearts and come face to face with all that separates us from God. When we do, we experience the power of God's redeeming love that transforms our fear into courage, tragedy into strength and losses into resilience.⁶ This is the way of the cross and the path to our salvation as we begin to experience eternal life here on earth.

In a few minutes we will celebrate Holy Eucharist, sharing the body and blood of the risen Christ. This ancient liturgy begins with the *Sursum corda*, Latin for "Lift up your hearts." We respond with "we lift them up to the Lord" as Christians have said through the ages. I invite you to think about your fears, those things that burden you and break your heart as you lift up your heart to God. And, what would it be for you to completely trust in God's redeeming love. What would it be to experience healing and wholeness as we walk together into the light as the Living Body of Christ. As St. Augustine reminds us, "our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

Amen.

⁶ David Lose.