

March 11, 2018
A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent
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GOSPEL

John 3:14-21

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the third chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus said:] ¹⁴“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“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.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

I don't know if you have any friends who do this...
but people sometimes use analogies with references so obscure
that they are useless to underscore their previous point...
because almost knowing understands what they are talking about.
I don't know...maybe I am that person in some of your lives...
in which case...I'm sorry.

That happened to me this past week...
and I was so confused by the reference that I can quote it directly...
because it was so weirdly memorable.
It was in reference to make fun of a television personality's eyes
(which...as an aside:
not cool to make fun of people's appearance...ever...
even if we think they are horrible people...
we should instead, of course, have substantive conversations

about values and the impact we all have in the world
and not stoop to petty mean-ness...)
That said, this is a direct quote:
“It looks like he’s killed 15 of 16 colossi in Shadow of the Colossus.”

If you have no idea what that means, congratulations...that’s my point.
I don’t either.
And if you do...I will present you with an obscure knowledge award
if you can explain it to me. My best guess is it has to do with a video game...

I think this may be happening to us a little bit today in John’s gospel.
Because Jesus is making a somewhat deep cut
in referring back to a less-celebrated episode
from the wilderness wandering of God’s people.
The bronze serpent was not in most of our Children’s Bibles.

But Nicodemus,
who Jesus is in the middle of a conversation with
when we intrude in the middle of John 3 today,
probably got the reference.
He probably knew the story really well.

And he had come to Jesus with a deep hunger
to understand what God was up to right now...
to know who Jesus was and what he was doing...
And this is the story Jesus uses to show him.

So what might Nicodemus have heard when he came to Jesus that night,
and what we might learn to hear today, as we come to Jesus...
looking to understand his mission and work...
and what it has to do with us?

The part we know and understand fairly well is this:
Jesus is telling us that he will be lifted up...
like the bronze serpent Moses
made to save the people who were bitten by the snakes
that came after they complained about the lack of water
and the monotony of manna...
That serpent became a cosmic pole...
a mediation of power between God and God’s people

in a time when they were still on the journey toward
(and sometimes away from and back towards again...)
the life God wanted them to choose.

It is a frequent refrain of John's gospel that
the Son of Humanity will be "lifted up"...
become a new axis between God
and the people who are separated from God and each other.
We hear it when the gospel begins
with the cosmic hymn of the Word that was in the beginning with God...
and Jesus invokes it immediately after,
when he speaks to the gathering disciples,
and we hear it again now as he speaks to Nicodemus.

We understand this part...and there is more...
There are parts that Nicodemus probably heard and understood,
but that may go over our heads.

First...it helps to explore more about these snakes
that appeared in the midst of the people wandering in the wilderness.
What really were they?

Their Hebrew name tells us they weren't just ordinary snakes.
They were Seraphim Serpents (*haNechashim haSaraphim*)*...
Making it sound as though they are related
to the holy creatures that guard the very throne of God.
They were likely powerful, frightening...creatures of fire and flight.
They brought that the feeling of the divine presence close by...
It is fiery and powerful...It defies gravity...and it can send us running scared.

And, I think we can see this arrival of heavenly beings
in the midst of the people
as something other than a sort of horror story,
setting the infernal guard dogs on intruders into God's good graces.
I think it is fair to say that, throughout time,
our sin has called God's presence closer...
to mend what we have broken...
and God loves us enough to come close...
but that closeness can be as scary as it is comforting...

What if humanity's ingratitude calls into the world powerful creatures
that don't have to play by the rules of gravity...
whose very breath is burning destruction...?
What would it be like to live in a world
where evil seemed to be able to circle the earth
before love and healing could even get out the door.
Do we really have to imagine it?
The consequences of human brokenness and sin
are thick in the air we breathe...
like a fine layer of dust on everything we touch...
always under our feet...getting stuck to the bottoms of our shoes...

What does it mean, then,
that the people who are struck by these creatures
have to look at an image of the very thing that condemned them
in order to be healed?
God's people are still learning that the very thing
that has the power to destroy them
also has the power to deliver them...
which is so often the reality of the divine presence...
which is where Luther derives the paradox of law and gospel.

The things of God that come close to us
sometimes are frightening and destructive, yes
(which is NOT to say that all destroyers are from God.
Abuse of all kinds...
those things which deny or dishonor the image of God
born by each human being...
and the goodness God has proclaimed over the whole creation...
Those destroyers are not from God).
And yet, while the closeness of holy things
should comfort and strengthen us...
they should probably also terrify us just a little...
not because God isn't loving...
but because the power of God
is the power that forges and splits atoms...

that collapses matter into black holes...
and that moves the stars and planets in their dance.
When we come close to God, we can expect to be utterly changed...
beyond our imagining.

It is why we treat the journey to the waters of Baptism
and the invitation to Holy Communion with such care...
not because we would ever want to declare anyone uninvited.
God becomes present in water...
and spreads this feast for all Creation...and...
we remember that when we come to it,
we are taking into our bodies and our lives
the very presence of the living God.
It is beautiful and terrifying.

We might could wrap this font and altar in caution tape...
just to be sure we remember how life-altering it is to come to these things.

So, even more than telling Nicodemus that Jesus will be
a new cosmic pole between heaven and earth...
Jesus is also showing him...and us...
an important part of who he is and where he comes from
by identifying with the seraphim-serpents
that came from beside Almighty God
and into the wilderness with the people...
He is showing us that he is from that heavenly throne room, too...
wonderful and fearful at once...

But there's more...
Even less well known, perhaps than the back story of the serpents...
is that the bronze serpent Moses makes
so the people can see the restoring power of the divine presence
doesn't just get left behind after the crisis has passed.
It stays with God's people for many generations...
We know this because in the time of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4)...
the king became worried that people had begun to care more
about the beautiful things that were made to point to God
than they truly cared about God.
So, he began a time of reform...
and, along with other objects that had become distractions
from God's true presence and purpose,

the bronze serpent
 (which had ceased to be that cosmic pole of recalibration
 and reconnection to God's healing power...
and had rather become a place that drew people away from God)
was taken down from its place of honor
and the king broke it into pieces...
 (which might be a lesson the church could learn from...
 what is holy and saving in one chapter of our lives,
 may be the very thing that pulls us away from God in another).

And then...at the end of Hezekiah's reign
 the Assyrians came and laid siege to Jerusalem...
 and the king paid a ransom from the city's wealth...
 to secure his people's freedom...
 Among the treasures he offered were precious metals...
 including a notably large amount of bronze...*
**(<https://corydriver.com/2018/03/06/lent-4-fiery-serpents-and-the-son-of-man/>)*

Jesus tells Nicodemus...
 and everyone who wonders who Jesus might really be
 three important things today
 (or at least three...there's always more)...
that 1) he will be lifted up as a new cosmic axis...
 a conduit between heaven and earth...
 like the serpent that saved the people...
2) that his first home is the throne room of heaven...
 like the powerful, spiritual beings – the seraphim-serpents –
 that came among the people in the wilderness...
and 3) That like the body of the bronze serpent...
 his body will soon be broken...
 and given over to the powers
 that would try to size God's people away...
 a ransom to keep them safe...to allow them to live.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus as he would to a rabbi or teacher,
in the darkness of night
to try to understand what he knows must be true...
 that there is a power from God on the loose in the world again
 in this Jesus...
 frightening...seeming to defy the fundamental laws of nature...
 seeming so close to the power of God...

And Nicodemus is right.

Jesus is here like the serpent who was lifted up to save the people...
and then broken and given as a ransom to save them again...

Because God has come close again...has heard our cries again...
and has come to save us...again...and again and again and again...

And God continues to reach into our lives and our world...

even to the point of being broken and ransomed

to the power of death itself,

so that we can all hear and see and touch and taste the truth,

that the Body of Christ is for us...

that God loves us...

that God claims us back from anything that would try to separate us from God,

No matter the cost.

Thanks be to God. Amen.