

Lent 4B

March 14, 2021

One of the most interesting pastoral visits I ever made came when I took a group of youth on a volunteering trip to Red Bird mission in Southeast Kentucky.

One evening after dinner we received a frightening phone call from Ms. Jordan, who lived across the street from the Mission house where we were staying. The seasoned preacher in charge of the mission was nowhere to be found, so I rushed over to her house eager to offer my assistance. When I arrived, her face was pale. Without saying a word, she handed me a broom and pointed at the ceiling of her porch. I looked up and saw a black snake wrapped around the porch beam, its beady eyes looking me and my broom. It stared at me. I stared at it. It stuck its tongue out. There was a little irony because I noticed a bowl of apples sitting on the table and I promised to God that no matter what the snake said I would not eat one. Fortunately, the snake made its way out a crack in the upper-wall of the porch. Ms. Jordan assured me it was the best pastoral care she had ever received.

Today's reading depicts an image that is both terrifying and comforting. It tells us of God's love and how through God's gift of Jesus the world is rescued. John tells us that Son of man will be lifted up like Moses lifted up a snake in the wilderness. The ancient image of primordial fear, the snake, and the promise of God's love go hand in hand. In the bible, just as in our lives, danger and love frequently dwell together.

Today's reading opens with Jesus alluding to an odd scene where the Israelites have gotten mixed up with a den of snakes out in the desert. They have been led out of slavery in Egypt, but they are not happy. They are weary and frustrated, and they start thinking going back might be the best thing to do. "Let's go back to Egypt!" they whine.

I have a friend who says every church he's ever been a part of has a "let's go back to Egypt committee," a group of people who are opposed to any sort of change and always want to go back to the way things used to be.

That's when God loses God's cool and sends a pack of poisonous snakes into their midst. You may remember the scene from Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark. Harrison Ford and his companions have landed in a snake pit while hunting the Arc of the Covenant. After lighting a lantern and seeing the thousands of serpents of all kinds crawling over them and no immediate way out, Indiana Jones boldly whispers, "Just remember, they are more scared of us than we are of them!"

Not so with the serpents God sent after the Israelites. Many people died before Moses crafted a poisonous snake made of bronze and lifted it high on a pole. All the Israelites who had died were given new life, and every time an Israelite was bitten by a snake, all he or she had to do was up their eyes to that snake and be healed.

It's an odd way for God to show God's love and mercy to people, isn't it? Granting healing through pain, by lifting high an image of ugliness and death to bring about new life. As I learned on Ms. Jordan's porch, staring into the eyes of a snake on a pole is a terrifying sight.

Anyone who has had surgery knows something about the terror and healing of a snake on a pole. The Canadian Medical Association in its seal has adopted the image of the ancient Greek God of Healing, with a snake wrapped around a staff. Sometimes when you go to the hospital to receive treatment, they often hurt you before they can heal you. Danger frequently paves the way to new life. An image of ugliness and death can sometimes be the means to wholeness.

Most of you, I would guess, are familiar with John 3:16. Even if you don't read the Bible, it shows up on signs at NFL games. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him would receive eternal life."

So, for those who believe, life comes from Jesus who is lifted high, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, to give life. The gospel writer John is foreshadowing the cross and resurrection of Jesus. To believe, he is saying, means to hand over your whole being, to give your heart.

You probably know something about that. You don't have to live very long to know that giving your heart, loving someone, is dangerous. Giving your heart to someone is an act of vulnerability, no less so for God. The moment you have uttered words, "I love you," you have handed your heart to someone else, and in that moment two things can happen. They can receive it gently, hold it, care for it, give their equally fragile heart to you, or they can drop your heart and watch it shatter into a million little pieces. But not to risk love is to go through life protected and alone. A shattered heart causes pain, but it is also aware of the pain of others. A broken heart can be the place where new life begins to spring forth, a place where you find redemption and salvation.

This sort of love can happen in all kinds of relationships, not only romantic ones. To love someone is not to do things for them, but to reveal to them their capacities for life, the light that is shining in them. This is the way God loves us, by trusting us rather than controlling us, so that we can begin to trust ourselves.

Like Jesus being lifted on the cross, love lifts us up. Love gives us a richer experience of life. Without love we miss out on the pain, but we also miss out on the glory. Without love we miss out on the agony of the cross but we also miss out on the joy of the resurrection.

When Jesus says, "God so loved the world," Jesus is asking us to see God truthfully. Not to impose on God our notions of what we believe God could and should do, not to remake God in our own image, but to take God for who God is. Sometimes it's hard to know whether love feels like dying or being lifted up. Danger and love always go together in life with God.

We're deep into the season of Lent now, that 40-day journey into the desert of our sin and barrenness of our souls, and Jesus says the answer to our wandering here is when the Son of Man is lifted high on the cross, the love of God is given for the world, love that was too much for us to handle. Rather than receiving the heart of God, we tried to remake Jesus in our own image, to see him as a problem to be solved and a project to be fixed. Ultimately it was his death that saved us.

The equation is not complicated, though it's hard to get our minds around it. The cure for a snake is a snake. The cure for human life is one person's life. The cure for death is death. The cure for love is love. Nothing less will do.

Lift up your eyes - to the cross, and open your heart.

Amen.