

## **“A Place for Grace”**

The Fourth Sunday in Lent - March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9 ~ Ephesians 2:1-10 ~ John 3:14-21

The cross, of course, is the primary symbol of our Christian faith and the heart of its central mystery. It is one of the few universal images we share with Christians of all kinds ... around the world ... and across the years. You will see one somewhere in most churches, though some intentionally refuse to hang crosses anywhere because they see them as a kind of “graven image” that might keep people from focusing on the inner reality of Christ’s living presence. Other churches hang crucifixes ... crosses with the image of the suffering Christ upon them ... while some churches prefer empty crosses emphasizing the resurrection. Some of these church crosses are wood ... some are gold or silver ...and some are decorated with other symbols.

Some Christian denominations make the sign of the cross when they pray in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I’ve always liked that gesture and quietly wished we practiced it, too, because it embodies Christian Trinitarian prayer in a distinctive way and reminds us that we are called to carry the cross ... and that we are under the cross ... and that we are covered by the cross. But isn’t it typical of us Christians that we have frequently fought with each other over what kind of cross to use and when to use it?

The cross has become so commonplace in Christian culture that we forget what a scandalous symbol it was at first. In the Roman world, the cross was a symbol of shame and violence ... of humiliation and execution. The sight of a cross on the edge of a city sent chills down the spine of anyone who passed by. The cross was a means of execution reserved for the worst offenders ... runaway slaves, traitors, and rebels against Roman authority. No matter how evil the crime, Roman citizens were spared the indignity of death by crucifixion. It was beneath them.

Why would we choose such a negative image? There was a great deal of discussion around the choice. The boat was one of the early contenders. It seemed a logical choice ... Noah’s ark, the stilling of the storm, fishers of men, and all that ... so much more positive ... so much easier to sell. The fish was also a prime candidate and either of those symbols would have been easier to take ... but the cross won out.

Why would they go with something like that? Maybe it was the simplicity. Two lines intersecting ... you see that everywhere you look ... in nature, in art, in architecture. You can’t escape it. What’s more, anybody can make it. You don’t have to be much of an artist to put

together a cross. But I don't think it was the simplicity. I think the cross won out because the *cross is the story!*

Our text today from the Hebrew Bible is a curious tale from the time of the Exodus when the Hebrews, wandering in the wilderness, are complaining against God. Again! This is the second generation after they left Egypt. Their parents complained against God ... griped about the manna ... criticized Moses ... worshipped the golden calf. They wore out God's patience until God said they could all die and the next generation would be allowed to enter the promised place. Like their parents, instead of trusting God, these children of Israel were also griping and whining and complaining again against God and against Moses. God, at the end of all patience, sent poisonous snakes into the camp. As Phyllis Tickle describes it, "snakes in the tents, snakes in the breadbaskets and the cooking pots, snakes in the bedrolls and snakes in the cribs." It gives me the creeps just to think about it. Somebody did a study just a few years ago of what people fear most. Snakes were number one, followed by spiders, followed by public speaking. (Tell me about it.) Snakes, snakes, everywhere! The people begged the same Moses they have blamed to *please, O please intercede*, and Moses prayed to God on behalf of the people. God told Moses to hammer a serpent out of brass and set it on a pole in the middle of the camp. Moses told the people, "When you're bitten by a snake, look up. Look up and see the brass snake. Look up and see God's provision for you. Look up and you will live."

It's an amazing story, with the surprising ironic twist ... that the very thing killing them turns out to be the thing that saves them. Therapists, psychologists, and seminary trained pastoral counselors would want us to explore the depth dimension of this story. The snakes don't go away. They're still crawling all over. People still get snake bit along the way. You can't just run away from your problems because ninety per cent of your problems are crawling around inside you. But when you face your problem courageously ... take responsibility to participate in your own healing instead of denying it or fearing it or whining about it ... you can be healed. The children of Israel, the children of the people of the Exodus still had to live with the snakes ... but when they looked up and trusted in God, they were saved. Writes Tickle: "Eighteen months later, it was these men and women who saw the Jordan part before them and who walked across its dry bed to claim the land of milk and honey promised them by God."

It's a great story and one of the few from the old Hebrew tradition that John applies directly to Jesus. In the verses that precede our reading, we learn that when Nicodemus the Pharisee came to Jesus in the middle of the night, he was an honest seeker... but he came with the usual academic's bag of excuses, conditions, rationalizations, ifs, buts, and what-have-yous ... and questions, questions, questions. Jesus cut to the chase and told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again. Nicodemus, the sophisticated academic turned into an unsophisticated literalist. He

just couldn't get his head around Jesus' metaphor of conversion. Nicodemus needed a whole new paradigm. Nicodemus needed a radical change of thinking. Nicodemus needed a radical change of being. Nicodemus needed to start over.

Typical of the fourth gospel, in the conversation which follows it's hard to tell where Jesus stops talking and John starts talking about Jesus. But John explains what Nicodemus needs to do and why ... what we need to do and how ... by referring to this great old story from the Exodus. He said, "*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*" Nicodemus needed to look up. You and I need to look up. When we're stuck in the muck of the messes we've made ... we need to look up. When we're pretending that things aren't so bad and that we're still in control ... we need to look up. When we're paralyzed by indecision, confused by the conundrums, and bogged down in the details ... we need to look up. When we're running scared and whining out loud ... we need to look up. When we've come to the end of our resources and can't see the way forward ... we need to look up. When we're dog-tired, down-trodden, and snake bitten by life ... we need to look up and trust in God! Look up, John says. Look up to Jesus. Look up to the cross. And we'll be saved!

The third verse of this passage, though, is of course, the "elephant in the room," so to speak. "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."

We know it so well because it's on street corners, T-Shirts, and sometimes painted on faces at sporting events. It is often taken as the quintessential "insider" verse ... the badge of honor for the believing Christian. It is often interpreted as "God came; God came to save me and the rest of you are on your own." But keep in mind that this Gospel was written later than the others. To be a follower of Christ, a person of The Way, was just downright hard. You were not an insider. You were part of a fledgling and sometimes persecuted minority that was just trying to hold it together. So, these words would have been words of encouragement ... words of strength ... a way of defining who they were as a Jewish minority. It was a way of reminding them why they were walking this difficult (and sometimes dangerous) path ... because of the great Love of God. But in the hands of some 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, these words have become weapons. They turn them into words of exclusion, designating who is "in" and who is "out." Well, first of all, nowhere in the Gospel are we the ones called to make that determination. And secondly, look at the whole context of John's Gospel. It starts out with Creation. It talks about this great Love that is God. And it proclaims that God came into the world to save the world and not condemn it. So how did we interpret this that God had quit loving some of us?

The Truth (that's with a capital T) reminds us that God offers us Life ... that God, in effect, *did* come into the world to save us—mostly, I would offer, from ourselves ... from our misdirected greed, our disproportionately selfish ambition, and from our basic desires to be something other than the one who God has called us to be. God desires this for *everyone*. God really does want to save the world from the world. I think that the world *does* need to somehow be moved to believe ... *does* need to somehow begin to see itself anew. But that will never happen if the cross is raised as a weapon. *Surely*, we get that it's something other than that!

Remember, God redeemed it. God took something so loathsome, so foreboding, so, for want of a better word, evil and turned it into Life. God is doing the same for the world. God loves the world so incredibly much that God would never leave us to our own devices. Instead, God comes into the world and offers us life; indeed, loves us so much that God offers us re-creation, redemption, and renewal. Don't you think *that's* the story? It's not about who's in or who's out. It's about Love. It's a promise that there's always more to the story than what we can see or fathom or paint on a sign. To say that we believe does not qualify us for membership ... it leads us to The Way of Life.

It's true. God loves us. God isn't mad at us. God loves us. Nothing can separate us from that love ... not even the worst we can do ... the worst that can happen ... the worst we might do to each other ... the worst others might do to us. God loves us still! And God wants to give us life, full, overflowing, everlasting. How do we know? Look up. Look up to the cross!

May we pray?

Gracious God, loving Lord, comforting Spirit, sometimes we forget the story. Sometimes we fail to trust. Sometimes we get so bogged down in our stuff we walk around with eyes downcast and we can only see misery, disaster, sorrow. But we are your children, Lord. And you love us. Lift our drooping shoulders and strengthen our weak knees. Fill us with courage. Fill us with faith, hope, and love. We look up to the cross and remember. We look up to you and we are saved. Amen.