

3-14-2021 4th Sunday of Lent

Welcome friends. We've arrived at the midpoint of Lent. I hope it has been a time of ease, and possibilities for reflection, to savor a little more gracefully and slowly what is happening to each of us these days, and to clarify the longings of our hearts.

As more of us get vaccinated, there are emerging signs of hope which make all of us glad. Who shall we become when we finally emerge from COVID? It may be five, six months yet, but who shall we become? And let us get prepared now.

We begin in the name of God, Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

O God, continue to pour out on us, like the refreshing rains, the spirit of your presence who renews from deep within. May we know in our innermost beings, that you are speaking to us, inviting us into a new springtime of hope, and grace, and peace. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

The first lesson is from the book of **Numbers, chapter 21**. [21: 4-9]

The Hebrew people left Mount Hor by the road to the Sea of Suf to skirt around Edom. On the way the people lost patience. They spoke against God and against Moses. "Why bring us out of Egypt to die here in this desert? For there is neither food nor water here. We are sick of this meager diet." At this God sent fiery serpents among the people. Their bite brought death to many in Israel. The people came and said to Moses, "We have sinned by speaking against God, and against you. Intercede with us so that God will save us from these serpents." Moses interceded for the people. And God required, "Make a fiery serpent and raise it as a standard. Anyone who is bitten and looks at that serpent will survive." Moses then made a serpent from bronze and raised it as a standard, and anyone who was bitten by a serpent, and looked upon that bronze serpent, did survive.

From **Ephesians, chapter 2**. [2: 1-2, 4-10]

You were dead, through the crimes and sins which used to make up your way of life and you were living according to the principles of this world, obeying the ruler

who dominates the empty air, the spirit who is at work in those who rebel. But God being rich in faithful love, through the great love which God has loved us, even when we were dead in our sins, God has brought us to new life of Christ. And it is through grace that you have been renewed and raised up with Christ, and given a place with him in heaven. This was to show for all ages to come, through God's goodness towards us in Christ, how extraordinarily rich God is in grace. Because it is by grace that you have been saved, not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit. Friends, we are God's work of art in Christ Jesus, and for the good works, which God has already designated for us, these now make up our way of life.

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[Gary Sponholtz plays and sings Psalm 60 setting by Bob Hurd: "My Soul is Thirsting"]

From the **Gospel of John, chapter 3** [3: 14-17]

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man, the Bar Enasha, the New Humanity, must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. This is how God has loved the world: God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.

The word of God.

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In the name of God, Abba Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What an intense story we have in the book of Numbers today. Yes? People complaining. Fiery, venomous serpents sent among them, slithering, crawling, all over them. People dying and crying. *No, I don't think that was a new vaccination program.*

We often debate whether these stories actually happened or not. I really don't care. Where did those serpents come from? From inside of the people.

Here they are complaining, moaning, and bemoaning, *'This isn't the life we asked for. The food's no good. We're thirsty. Who's in charge here? Let's make Egypt great again. Let's go back to the good old days of slavery.'*

And God was angry with the people--*"What have I done?"* Do you remember the beginning of the Covenant story we just heard? *'I'm the one who set you free so that your life might flourish, that you might be brought to something new.'*

And that is always the gift of faith--drawing us into something bigger, larger, unimaginable before, but now we belong to the One who makes all life new.

After this destruction is going on, and people are dying, and plead with Moses, *'Intercede for us and spare us.'* And God relents, and asks Moses to raise up a serpent on a standard, which he does. And those who gaze upon the serpent could be spared. Those who gaze at what is killing them, would have a new life. That, that is the fulcrum point of the Faith: the bitching and moaning and complaining, the despair, the escape from facing ourselves. Faith dissolves that, or at least wants to. By gazing on that which was killing them, they were acknowledging and recognizing that 'I have contributed to this dying', and facing their worst fears.

In the Gospel story today, St. John, of all the images in the Hebrew scriptures chooses this--Moses' lifting up of the serpent on the standard, and says, *'In like fashion the Bar Enasha, the Son of Man, the New Human Being, and the New Humanity, must likewise be lifted up'* so then we can see in this cross who we are. We do recognize in Christ Crucified a sense of ourselves, where we have been diminished, or attacked, undone, burdened. We see that in the Christ on the cross. We can have an empathy for that.

But we also see Christ as scapegoated--the one whose innocent suffering is offered to ensure compassion for all of God's people everywhere around the world. And that scapegoating is the bitterness of the attacks we place on one another to escape our own responsibility. And in that gazing at the Christ on the cross, we also see him gazing back at us with compassion.

This is the great inversion of all the suffering world's scapegoating tactics, which seek to avoid our responsibility, which seek to target others--and usually the

weak, the vulnerable, the ill, and disabled, the aged, the marginalized, women, the Jews.

The Gospel has nothing to do with that. It invites us to perceive the world through the eyes of compassion, with which Christ gazes at us even when crucified. But the one thing that Christ will never do, as St. John makes clear, is condemn the world. Christ is here to love us into being, into the beauty of who we are, to create the renewed creation.

Christ crucified is not just about a sacrifice, the ultimate price paid, or seeing how much that he can do. Christ was crucified in order to liberate us to love, in all circumstances where we find ourselves, in the deepest darkness of life and night. There, the crucified One is always ready and willing to birth a resurrecting light in us in love. It's about liberating us.

Well, we have two responses to the crucified Christ. At first, we are grateful, and we are amazed, and we are overwhelmed at the compassion which has been shown towards us. But our second response is to run away.

Yet we've never experienced anything like this before in our lives, and no matter how deeply our faith has grown over the years, it still is haunting to be the recipient of an unconditional, infinite compassion, which measures us not according to our worth, our value, our accomplishments, our success, but according to God's love. That's the grace that is endlessly poured out. God can love us no more and no less than God already loves us.

Oh, so to be a disciple, to be a friend of Christ, is to constantly go back and forth, to be drawn into that incredible compassion, and, to try and flee. That's normal for us.

Well, in *Ephesians* today, we receive the encouragement to not get stuck in that old world of judging and condemning, blaming and scapegoating, but to move into this new life of grace. For that that old world, you see, is venomous. It's filled with nothing but toxic poisons which seek to destroy others, but in truth are actually destroying us. As our friend the Buddha said, "*We drink a cup of poison, hoping to kill the other.*" In reality, it kills us.

So, in this new life of grace, we will experience being surprised, constantly having our eyes open, again and again and again, to see who we really are, and who we are in relationship to others. We are invited to live beyond the venom of judging and condemning others, and, allowing them to enter our hearts no matter where they are coming from, whatever their experiences have shaped them into being. We're not here to judge that stuff. We're here to discover the brotherhood, sisterhood that is ours in Christ.

And we will be turned around, again and again and again. Our faith and history are filled with stories of reconciliation, people who thought others were less than human--subhuman--to discover a friendship which they had never anticipated. We're here to help provoke those transformations. And, of course, the most surprising is always when we find out that people we thought were our enemies are actually potential friends.

You see--as Ephesians makes clear--you, me, we are God's work of art, unfathomable possibilities, new dimensions being explored. You, we, are that art work of God meant to bless the world and make it more beautiful. Friends, you are the treasure and the pleasure of God. Enjoy that all this next week long. Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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O God, we pray this day that you would still the venom that is within us; dissolve it into your grace. Heal us of all negative emotions, actions, which disturb our hearts, and blind us to the worth and value of others. May we trust in and enjoy manifesting the beauty and the art of grace that you have given to each of us. And may we grow strong, loving, and wise in your infinite compassion, for which Christ gave his life, and for which you raised him. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Glory be to God, and upon us weak and wounded people, us amazing and beautiful creatures, may mercy and compassion be shed in both worlds now and forever. Amen.

Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

[Gary Sponholtz plays and sings “The Prayer of St. Patrick”]