

Lent 4, Yr B, March 11, 2018

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Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Guess what? The last time I preached from these texts, Lent 4 yr B, three years ago was when I supplied for William here at Emmanuel. Isn't that cool?!

I looked back at the sermon. It was remarkably like what I wanted to share with you today.

When I was growing up, our bed-night process included a story from the Moody Bible Story Book.

It was a big thick book, put together by people who felt they needed to pass on to children their conviction of the literal inerrancy of scripture – so none of the stories, not even the violent ones, were left out.

I still remember the bronze serpent; I think there was even a picture. The story had a kind of logic I sensed even as a kid.

It's a story that illustrates a major psychological principal: the paradox of healing, that illness, like small pox or polio, often contains the seeds of it's own cure.

The People of God are wandering in wilderness. They're on the road to freedom,

but it takes a long time to get to freedom and it's not an easy road, so they're full of complaints.

"There's no food and no water here, and we detest this miserable food." It made me laugh, reminded me of my kids as teenagers,

"There's no food in this house!" "Wait a minute, the fridge is full of manna, what's the problem?" "That detestable food?"

And so poisonous serpents invade the camp. Snake bites, what a perfect metaphor for complaining. Persistent negativity really *does* make people sick.

In fact, snakebite is a good metaphor for many sins: think about envy (how someone else's success or good fortune or laudable qualities "bite" at you).

And lust (how what the BCP calls "inordinate desires" and their accompanying thoughts and fantasies can buzz around you and bite like mosquitoes),

how anger and pride and greed "nip at your heels."

Snakebites that settle in can poison the whole system. William Blake's poem, "A Poison Tree," goes like this:

(read poem)

We like to see ourselves as honorable people, or at least justifiably dishonorable. We don't like to see certain other qualities or actions in ourselves – they cause shame, we want to deny them, to ignore them, to push them away.

The great psychologist Carl Jung described what he called the shadow side of personality,

the parts of ourselves that we don't like, that we try to hide, emotions that we were subtly taught we weren't "supposed" to feel.

When pushed away, like rejected children, they become a cause of suffering, hurting us and the people around us,

because when we fear and reject the qualities in ourselves that we don't like, we inevitably project them onto others, condemning them and ourselves.

Ever notice that, that the people we don't like exhibit qualities that we have rejected in ourselves.

Snakebites. Not fun. The people come back to Moses – "Moses, Moses, our bad. Take these snakes away!" We don't like these feelings.

But instead of taking them away, God tells Moses to make the great bronze snake,

mount it on a pole, and put it in the middle of the camp, so that the people can look at it – and be healed.

"Look at it." Look at our shadow selves, our sins. Instead of pushing away our feelings of anger, envy, greed or pride,

we need to look at them, name them, tell the truth about them, and ask even them what they have to teach us.

Another poem, this one by Rumi
(read poem)

Psychologist Carl Rogers taught that we can't change until we first accept ourselves as we are, until we are willing to say,

I'm wounded, I'm rebellious, I'm proud, I'm bull-headed. The beginning of healing in AA is to say, "My name is John and I am an alcoholic."

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus says to Nicodemus – just as the People looked up at the serpent in the wilderness and were healed,

look up at me, TELL me THE TRUTH of who you think you are, let me bring you healing.

My first Spiritual Director talked about prayer as five parts: Show up, pay attention, TELL THE TRUTH, do your best, detach from the outcome.

Telling the truth is hard, we often carry a boatload of shame, we expect to be judged and condemned,

we anticipate it, we project it out in judgment and condemnation of others, but really it is condemnation internalized.

But the message of the Gospel, the Good News that Jesus goes on to share with Nicodemus is that God loves and does not condemn.

It can be hard to accept that God *truly* loves us, loves all creation. It can be hard for us to believe that as far as God is concerned, love trumps condemnation every time.

It can be hard for us to open ourselves to the Light, to let go the fear or the habits of hiding.

But hiding is self-condemnation, choosing to reject the acceptance and the healing that comes from TRUTH TELLING.

The central message is that there is no need to fear. 1 John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love,

...perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment" and living in fear works against being able to receive God's love.

Of course we sin. Of course we get snakebites. Sometimes we go looking for the snakes. 1 John is frank about it.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." But when we tell the truth about it,

when we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just forgives them and wipes the slate clean.

Confession is a central part of Christian practice. We say a confession together every Sunday

but there is also a Rite in the Prayer Book for making a personal confession, perhaps during Lent or at any time.

I would be happy to talk with you about that if you wish, and you can find the words in the prayer book, on p. 447.

Jesus takes the bronze serpent image to its deepest level. He himself has become the source of healing for the sins of the whole world.

"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."

Later, just before his death, Jesus says, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

"Whoever believes in him..." These verses in John are troublesome to many people.

We're not sure what John means by "...believing in..." because "belief" commonly has come to mean adhering to a certain set of precepts.

But the real meaning of the word "believing" comes from an Old English word that is more like "beloving,"

or the Latin word "credo," "I believe," as in "I give my heart to..." To believe is to trust.

When we believe, when we trust, and we bring our whole selves into the Light, the sting of death and sin is removed.

God's self-giving love revealed in Jesus' self-giving death on the cross has overcome it. That is the grace that saves us.

You were dead, says Paul in Ephesians 2:1. But God who is rich in mercy, the riches of whose grace and loving-kindness are immeasurable,

that God loved us, with all our deadness exposed in the Light, not only loves us but saves us, lifts us up, brings us to sit beside him. It is purely grace, pure gift.

The result? "There is therefore no condemnation," and there is also no boasting, no self-made human, only God-made humanity.

Ephesians 2:10 in the King James Version, the way I learned it originally says, "...for we are God's workmanship,"

God's weaving, God's woodworking project, God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus,

to join God in doing God's work. That becomes our way of life.

We aren't intended for condemnation but for freedom from shame, freedom from fear.

We are intended for a way of life that brings abundant joy to our deepest selves, to all around us, and above all, to God.

Join me; let us celebrate this abundant life together as we gather at the Table of the Lord. Amen.