

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year B  
March 15, 2015  
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere  
The Rev. Shari Young, Preacher

What a vivid story in the book of Numbers; which by the way could be called the book of Arithmetic, since its name derives from this word in Latin and Greek translations. What's amazing to me is that this is a story from the Bronze Age, and it is still current in our religious life.

The Israelites have been wandering around in the desert for a long time, and they are complaining like children on a long car trip. "Are we there yet?? I hate this organic peanut butter, whole grain, homemade raspberry jam sandwich! I want Chicken McNuggets and french fries.....When can we stop??"

God reacts like every annoyed parent wishes they could; He drops the pretense of patience and pacification and goes for a 'whack' returning the same negative energy He is getting. Only this is God; God doesn't do anything half way. He sends poisonous snakes to bite the people... "That'll fix you. Now shut up and be grateful."

But the story gets richer and more vivid. God tells Moses to make a poisonous snake and put it on a pole, and when the people are bitten, they are to look at it and they will live. Moses makes it out of bronze; his relatives were metal smiths, and this incidence takes place near one of antiquity's greatest copper sources. The people looked at this bronze snake on a pole and lived.

In today's gospel, the lifting up of Jesus, both in crucifixion, and in resurrection, are compared to this lifting up of the bronze serpent. Here at St. Stephen's, it is easy to look to Jesus lifted up (preacher indicates craving of Jesus on Chancel wall)

Shifting story universes from the Numbers lesson to today's gospel we fast forward to a dark corner in Jerusalem some 1600 years later. A very powerful Jewish leader has sought out Jesus on the side, not wanting to be seen. He has come to believe, but he is not ready to thoroughly commit and be seen as a follower of this radical outsider. In John's gospel, the darkness is also a metaphor for spiritual darkness. Nicodemus, the rabbi, the Sanhedrin, the Pharisee has only begun to see.

In today's passage is one of the most famous bible citations ever. "John 3:16" is seen spray-painted on walls, lifted up at televised football and baseball games, on billboards in certain parts of the country. Can you say this verse?

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that who so ever should believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

While this is the gist of what we are doing here today, I don't think this is the important part of the passage.

I would want to emphasize

*“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

Condemnation is not in God's nature. It's human nature, to judge and to exclude. That's what's going on in Ferguson, and with Isis, and in Washington.

But, Jesus came to heal, not to condemn. To unite, not divide.

The punishment, the condemnation for not believing in Jesus is simply remaining in the darkness.

In order to come into the light, We must face ourselves and look at that which poisons us and wounds us in order to find healing.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpents that poisoned and harmed the Israelites in the wilderness, we are called to face what is wounding us and how our actions wound others, lifting it up and bringing it into the light so that God can begin to heal us and our communities.

We have words for this: confession and absolution, confession and forgiveness.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpents that poisoned and harmed the Israelites in the wilderness, we are simultaneously reminded by the image of Jesus on the cross, that the crosses in our lives are always followed by resurrection.

The movement out of spiritual darkness into spiritual light is learning to trust and abide in the truth that God is here, now, as love and forgiveness and the constant presence of grace.

The fiery serpents are tamed by grace.