

4 Lent

John 3:16

Church of Holy Communion, 3-15-2015

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent...it is John 3:16 Sunday. I once heard Phyllis Tickle say that, when asked what was their favorite passage in Scripture, 86% of Christians would answer “John 3:16”. That God sent his only Son to save the world is perhaps the central theme of the New Testament, if not the entire Bible. However, after reading today’s lessons, I’m going to lovingly refer to today as “Snake Sunday”. The appearance of the serpent occurs often in the Old Testament: it was the wily old serpent that tricked Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the Old Testament reading from the of book of Numbers, it was poisonous snakes that God sent to the people of Israel, when they rebelled and complained about the “miserable food” they found in the wilderness; many died from the snakebites they received there. When the people finally repented, God ordered Moses to make a serpent of bronze and to raise it up on a pole, so that any other people bitten by the snakes could look upon that bronze serpent on the pole and survive...quite an irony, that one could survive a fatal snakebite just by looking upon another snake! In John’s Gospel, Jesus compares his own need to be lifted up, after his coming crucifixion and Resurrection, to that of Moses raising the bronze serpent in the wilderness.

A few weeks ago, I preached bout the sheep and the goats, and I tried to find something nice to say about the goats, to speak to the goat-lovers of the world. Today, it’s the snakes, and it’s a lot harder to find much praise for them. Probably the best snake is the one you see slithering away from you.

If you are turkey-hunting in the woods on a warm spring day, the last thing you want to see is a big, fat copperhead beginning to coil a couple of feet away.

They say that rattlesnake meat is good eating. I can see marinating the meat overnight in a wine sauce, taking it out the next day, wrapping some bacon around it and cooking it on the grill...maybe serving some roasted new potatoes with it, along with fresh collard greens and hot cornbread, and topped off with a bowl off blackberry cobbler! Your Deacon is a “foodie”.

Some of you in the medical field may be familiar with Asclepius, who was the Greek god for medicine and healing. The symbol for Asclepius is a rod with a single serpent wound around it, and is frequently seen as an emblem for various medical organizations. In the time of Asclepius, 300-400 years before the birth of Christ, non-poisonous snakes were considered to have healing qualities, and it was not unusual to find them crawling around on the floors of hospital wards for the chronically ill, and many claimed to have recovered as a result of the snakes being present...I promise you, I am not making this up! Can you imagine waiting patiently to have your cardiac catheterization, and find snakes crawling around under your bed?! I'm getting away from the Gospel, enough about snakes; let's try to find a message here!

I see a parallel between some of the characters in these readings and in fellow Christians our world today. It didn't take long for the people of Israel to forget their gratitude to God for delivering them from bondage in Egypt. Shortly after arriving in the wilderness, they began to whine and to complain about the quality of the food...and then the snakes came.

Certainly none of us would ever complain to God about what he does, or does not, give us, right? If we have been given much, we want more, and more, to the point that we become confused about our true values, and we may be entering a wilderness where we have already been bitten by the serpent of apathy, greed, indifference, complacency, selfishness, and self-satisfaction? To find our way back to the path God intends us to follow, we need to look for the bronze serpent, in the form of Christ, so that our bites may be healed by the power of the cross.

Returning to the Gospel story, let's look at Nicodemus: he was a well-educated man, a respected religious authority and likely a man of some wealth. He was curious about the upstart Jesus, and set out to learn more about him and his views. Nicodemus appeared to Jesus in the dark of night, as if not wanting anyone to see him approaching this troublemaker. He wanted a smidgeon of insight and knowledge about this man who was gaining such a large following, but did not want to be seen in the light of day. Content with his own piety, he had no need to have "grace", or to be "born again"; he just wanted to know what this radical, Jesus, had to say...and, what Jesus does ultimately say, Nicodemus does not comprehend. How do we show up to Jesus...in the darkness, or in the light? Are we seeking just a smidgeon of faith and religion, or are we jettisoning the engines of self-satisfaction and letting go of our need for control? If Nicodemus were around to ask us about the meaning of "grace" and "being born again", could we give a good definition...and, would the answers we give reflect the way we are living our lives? Will the spiritual nourishment we receive here on Sunday morning stick with us in the bright sunlight of the workweek, or will we prefer the darkness of the status quo, not wanting

to make waves in the rough seas of justice, or sustain any cracks in the socially protective cocoon we have woven around ourselves?

Later in John's narrative, Nicodemus did redeem himself. He appeared with Joseph of Arimathea, in the broad daylight, to help care for the body of Jesus. He travelled from the darkness of doubt and misunderstanding into the light of truth and clarity. After the Resurrection of Jesus, Nicodemus saw that "being born again" did not mean any intrinsic change in human nature, but rather the beginning of a new life, one in which the full nature of God is known, through his Son, Jesus Christ. I have a mental image of that scene, with Nicodemus kneeling at the foot of the crucified Christ, tenderly touching him, wrapping him in white linens and anointing him with fine oils, and saying to himself, "why did I not listen to you more carefully"? "Why could I not understand sooner, and what can I do now to repent"? "You came to save me, and all the children of God, and I doubted; what can I do now to have eternal life"?

On this day in March of 2015, when the force of John 3:16 smacks us right in the face, just three weeks before Easter, what can we do to come away from the darkness of sin and the shadows of doubt about what God calls us to do with our lives. How can we come into the light, and kneel at the foot of the cross? With what adornments and oils can we embrace the crucified Christ? As Moses hoisted the bronze serpent so that the people of Israel could be saved from death, God has lifted up, in divine brilliance before us, his Son, Jesus Christ, to behold with wonder, love, and praise. His light will shine in our hearts, and can lead us to eternal life, a life no longer defined by human will but by the will of God, a life transformed by

the need for, and acceptance of, love, mercy, and justice for all of God's children.

Amen.