

Sermon: March 22, 2009

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

Title: "Lifting Up The Lord"

When the Israelite children grumbled against God in the wilderness and complained that Moses had led them off to die in the desert, God sent serpents to punish them. Many were bitten by these poisonous reptiles and died. When they saw the error of their ways, God had Moses make a serpent and place it on a pole for all to view. Those who were bitten only had to come and look at the snake on the pole raised high above their heads. Then they would not die. It seems so simple and reeks of magic. When the people become corrupt God uses other ways of bringing them back.. captivity in Babylon being one form of punishment. It worked for a short time. Finally, God chose to enter man's existence as a human being. This time God's salvation comes not by the symbol of a snake on a pole, but by the crucifixion of God's son on a cross. So that we can come to that cross and receive the free gift of salvation. Not magic or hocus pocus, but spiritual rebirth and a new life for all who would look up and see the Christ.

Call to Worship

Adapted from Psalm 107

Give Thanks to the Lord, for God is good;

His love endures forever.

Let the redeemed of the Lord say this:

Some wandered in desert wastelands,

Finding no way to a city where they could settle.

Let the redeemed of the Lord say this:

Some became fools through their rebellious ways,

And suffered affliction because of their iniquities.

Let the redeemed of the Lord say this:

They cried to the Lord in their trouble,

And God saved them from their distress.

Therefore, let the redeemed of the Lord declare this:

Let us give thanks to the Lord for God's unfailing love.

And God's wonderful deeds for God's people.

Hymns: #288 I Sing the Mighty Power of God

#84 In the Cross of Christ I Glory

#81 Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days

Prayer of Confession

from: Whispers of God, by Lavon Bayler

We come to you, O God, an unfaithful people. We have sinned against you and done much that is evil in your sight. The shadows of sin dominate us, and our secret faults separate us from the light and knowledge of your presence. Have mercy on us, blot out our transgressions, forgive our iniquity, and remember our sin no more. Purge us and we will be

clean, wash us and we will be purer than newfallen snow. Grant us, O God, a new and right Spirit. Amen.

Call to Confession:

With trembling hearts, knowing that we seldom discern our own errors, we turn ourselves toward the Eternal One. Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. Come to the One who takes no delight in burnt offerings, but accepts the sincere prayers of the penitent. Let us repent and believe.

Jesus Christ, the source of our salvation, died for our sins, once for all, to put to death the trespasses in which we have been living and destroy the domination of evil among us. We have been reconciled to God, through Christ, and made partners in a new covenant. God is compassionate and merciful, granting us clean hearts and new life in Christ. Rejoice, open your lips, and let your mouths show forth the Creator's praise. Amen.

Sermon:

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

Title: "Lifting Up The Lord"

Wouldn't it be nice if, when we were afflicted with some dire malaise all we had to do was to go look at an image on a pole and we would be protected from that illness.

For example: suppose we were beset with shingles. At the first sign of the disease, we would go the Church and look up at an image carved in a pole that represented the illness and we would be relieved of the symptoms.

Or, if we were diagnosed with cancer. We would go to the Church and find the pole with the symbol for cancer carved on it. A few minutes of meditation in front of that pole and "bingo" the cancer is gone.

How many different poles would we need to have here at the Church. And what if you caught something that we didn't have a pole for, and the Episcopalians had a pole for that disease. Could you go up there and pay a fee and gaze at their pole?

But, what if the abnormality we were facing wasn't a disease, but a social ill, like prejudice or greed or war. Could we have a pole for each of these so that when we were beset by them we could stand in front of that pole, say a short prayer, and go away relieved of that affliction? Oh yes.... How about a pole for World Peace!

Do you see where all this is heading? Nowhere!

It all sounds rather bazaar does it not? Whoever heard of such a thing? Well, the children of Israel not only heard about it, they experienced it. They had successfully evaded the armies of Egypt. They were free of their slavery to Egyptian tyranny. They were on their way to becoming the Nation of Israel. Moses was leading them south along the Eastern shore of the Red Sea. He was attempting to circle around the nation of Edom. He did not want the Edommites to feel threatened by this hoard of nomads. This motley group of ex slaves might have been seen as a threat, so Moses was leading them through land that was not very hospitable to human life. And the people grumbled. They lashed out against God and against Moses.

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food! It did not take

long for the ex slaves to forget the miserable conditions under which they lived in Egypt. And God sent snakes. Not just any snakes, but venomous snakes. And people were bit and they died. Right away the people made the connection between their grumbling and the arrival of the snakes. The snakes were a punishment for their rebellion against the Grace of God. So they repented and asked Moses to have God remove the snakes. But God has a better idea. The snakes remained. Moses was to create an image of a snake and put it on a pole so that anyone who is bitten can come and gaze at the snake on the pole and not die.

Interesting little story isn't it. An insignificant little story. Six verses which go unnoticed by most readers. Just another little reminder of how God led the people in the wilderness.

The people grumble, God sends judgment, the people repent, God supplies a way to maintain life. A primitive, but effective way to understand the relationship between God and God's people.

However, as the People of God developed into the nation of Israel, and as they grew in their knowledge and understanding of God, their understanding of life grew and expanded. God's Grace was no longer embodied in a snake on a pole. God's Grace was envisioned as a covenant, an agreement between God and God's people. "The phrase: I will be your God and you will be my people." Becomes the mantra. And the laws of God's covenant became the safeguard by which they were to live.

Still, the people of God fell away. They chased after other Gods. They violated the laws of the Covenant. They grumbled again and again against God. And the history of the Israelite people is filled with the recurring stories of how God disciplined them. Each time they responded by coming back to God and each time God forgave and restored them. And there developed within Judaism the idea that righteousness was a matter of how one lived, how one fulfilled the laws, how one did what was right. The more you did for God, the more God loved you. The more you adhered to the jot and tittle of the law of God, the closer you were to “being religious”.

Then, something phenomenal happened. God sent his Son to dwell with mankind. Paul captures the essence of God’s action when he writes to the Ephesians: (Read Ephesians 2:1-10)

In Christ we discover a shift away from what we do to what God does for us. Paul says ***“It is by grace you have been saved. Through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, ”***

In his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus reaches back into the Old Testament and reminds Nicodemus of an earlier event in the life of God’s people. Then Jesus makes a direct association between himself and that bronze snake which Moses lifted up on a pole. Back in Moses’ day, those who wanted to live after being bitten by a snake, came to the pole and the replica of the snake and they were saved. But in these later days, Jesus tells Nicodemus, God has lifted up The Son of Man. That is a code word for Jesus himself. It is a code word for Messiah. It is a code word for Son of God. And Jesus is the only person in all of Scripture who uses that phrase to identify himself. Even that phrase goes

back to Old Testament writings. If you want to explore the idea of The Son of Man, go back to Daniel 7.

The imagery is quite profound. Compare the image of a bronze snake on a pole with the live Jesus who died on the cross and rose from the grave, who is alive today. Try to wrap your mind around the idea that our God cares so much for us to send a real live human being who embodies within Himself all the Godness that exists with the Father. Now, which would you rather rely on? A bronze snake on a pole, or a risen Lord.

And once you have decided that a living Christ is more effective in bringing salvation into the world and into your life, then you have no other alternative but to have Faith in Christ as your savior and faith in the God who is the father of all creation. This is the same God who sent his Son into the world that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Or. Stated in Jesus' own words.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:17)

Did you memorize that when you were a kid in vacation bible School?

Did you ever think when you memorized those words from Jesus that you were saying:

I believe in a God who is alive, not an image on a pole.

Why is our cross empty? Because Jesus is not there. He is alive. Can you say “He is Alive?” Say it! He is alive.

So, we lift up an empty cross, so that those of us who have been bitten by greed and anger and bitterness and self serving egos and distrust of others and prejudices and self-righteousness and gossiping tongues, and broken relationships and

We can come to the cross which God has lifted up in the midst of our struggles with life and we can know through the power of that cross that God already loves us and forgives us and all we need to do is respond in faith.

There may be someone here this morning who is still looking for a bronze serpent on a pole to absolve them of their struggles, their pain, their feelings of insecurities and sinfulness. They may be searching for the serpent of a bigger paycheck, or the serpent of a finer home or a more prestigious car. They may be looking for the serpent of public adulation and recognition. But what they forget is that God did not take away the snakes.

The Israelites asked Moses to plead with God to take away the snakes and instead, God sent a momentary reprieve from the bites. The snakes were still there.

If we look to this world's so called cures for our aches and pains, we may get a reprieve, but the causes are still there. Only the Christ, freely given and freely received can stop the causes of our aches. That is what Faith does for us.

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