

"Healing"
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
10 March 2024
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107:17-11
Ephesians 2:1-10
St. John 3:14-21

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Snakes

My purpose this morning is to talk about healing, but before we can do that we need to talk about snakes, for they make an appearance in the first reading and in today's Gospel. The serpent plays a role as a menace to people, as a sign of health and salvation, and finally as a reference in the Gospel. We are conditioned by the Creation Stories to see the snake as an evil, manipulating entity. But there is more. Such various roles befit the serpent who was a significant part of the cultural and religious life of the peoples of Egypt, Israel, Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Greece. In these cultures, the serpent was symbolic of wildly divergent ideas. It was the symbol of healing and fertility as well as chaos and evil. In the story of Adam and Eve, the serpent is an agent of disruption and temptation, while for Moses and Aaron it was a sign of their participation in the power of YHWH, who would lead Israel out of slavery into freedom. In Mesopotamian literature, a snake steals the immortality of Gilgamesh. It is also depicted as a symbol of the cycle of life, the snake devouring its own tail. Remnants of snake figures have been found throughout the Levant, Mesopotamia, Egypt and even in Hittite ruins. That this image should have such a universal recognition reminds us that the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures merge out of a common culture and understanding, and the Hebrew Scriptures bring all of those roles to bear in their stories and histories. Think about the symbol once universally used in pharmacies and doctors' offices, the caduceus, the snake wrapped around a staff, a sign of healing. So now let's search for that healing.

Facing our Demons

The tale from the Hebrew Scriptures is a story of God's wrath and punishment, and also of God's mercy and healing. The Israelites are often pictured as a people murmuring and mumbling against God. Such is the case in this reading, which causes God to send snakes to punish the people. They realize that they have sinned by speaking against both God and Moses, and ask that they be delivered from this plague. The solution is suggested by God, that Moses should fashion an image of the serpent, and if the people looked at it, they would be healed and saved. This image of salvation we will meet again in the Gospel of John.

What this text suggests to me beyond its serving as a prefiguring of Jesus, lifted up on the cross, is a contemporary psychological reality = that we face our demons, and not only our own, but those that disrupt our relations with others. What are the demons that disrupt your relationship with God, or the relationship with your neighbor. Christian teaching suggests that we look them straight in the eye and stare them down – relieving them from influence in our lives. Look at the snake. Look at what it is that disrupts your living, that troubles you in your life with others. Moving on...

Finding God's Healing

The psalm for this morning attempts to convince us that there is healing with God, healing for which we ought to give thanks. What is important to see in this psalm is that this healing is not just for a certain people, a chosen people, but is promised to all. *"God gathered them out of the lands from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south."* There are many in our society who see God's blessings, God's healing as intended only for certain people. God is not thinking in those terms, but rather extends a saving and healing hand to all people. This is something that we should give thanks for and that we should aid in – our hands offering healing to those that are poor or outcast, that are addicted or diseased, well you can name the categories. It is all a part of God's plan.

Finding God's Plan and Healing

In the second reading for today, Paul discloses God's plan of salvation – *"as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world."* He then goes on to see the fulfillment of that plan in Christ, and our participation in that plan as heirs and members of Christ's body. Our reading, however, begins with a prior state, *"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived."* Think on the Israelites in their troubles in their journey to promise. Paul then details salvation and redemption. It is the same picture of a healing God whom we have seen in the First Reading and in the Psalm as well. Paul keeps his contemporary readers in mind as he discusses *"the ruler of the power of the air."* Here he recognizes the ancient cosmology as he strives to describe the life that is better lived in Christ, the one raised up like the serpent, raised up on a cross. Paul contrasts what once was with what will be in Christ. He takes pains to describe what had been the Ephesians past (*"All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else."*), and then lifts up the entire enterprise as one in which in spite of it all God still loves us, and gives us the gift of the Christ, raised up for all of us.

Finding Christ the light and Healing

Our selection from John's Gospel comes in the midst of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, who wants a further understanding of this man he recognizes as a teacher come from God. Jesus appeals to Nicodemus' understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures as he introduces into their conversation the story of Moses and the Bronze Serpent. It's a stunning image and one that foreshadows Jesus' own destiny in his last visit to Jerusalem (this is his first). In this conversation Jesus uses the idea of being "lifted up" in a double sense – the literal being lift us, as in the crucifixion, and in the sense of being

exalted. Even this image would have been familiar to Nicodemus having read of it in Second Isaiah who sees the Suffering Servant as being "lifted high."

Jesus, in John's telling, also uses another image – and it is made even more poignant in that Nicodemus has come to him in the middle of the night. Jesus sees himself as light, "*light has come into the world.*" The problem that Jesus outlines to Nicodemus is that the people prefer darkness, and the acts that happen in darkness. Here John outlines the conflict of two natures within us. There is a part of living that prefers the darkness, and a part that yearns for the light.

In his prologue in the first chapter, John uses the Creation as a model for his speaking of Christ. He uses the image of light – the light that God has separated from the darkness, the light that is given to us for use in our own life, the light of John the Baptist, and the light that is Christ. What we see in the light can be apprehended with either faith, or disbelief. A choice must be made. Saint Augustine has an interesting comment in this light, "they love truth when it enlightens them, they hate truth when it accuses them."²¹ So we are encouraged to see Jesus in that light that is the gift of healing from God. So then, what do you need to look at to acquire your healing?

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