

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2021

Year B RCL

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

“Whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

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Let us begin with the conclusions: First, our salvation is by grace in Jesus the gift from God, he loved the world so much that he gave his only Son for us. Second, to receive eternal life, we need to believe. Third, the love of God for his creation works according with God’s omnipotent, omniscient, and infinite omnipresence that we cannot explain because it is contrary to our standards of love.

To emphasize and point to these conclusions, today’s Scripture readings offer two metaphorical images that convey connection, anticipation, and fulfilment in Jesus amid the Old and New Testament. The serpent of bronze on a pole where all can see in the first lesson from the book of Numbers and the direct reference to “the Son of Man lifted up” (which in Johannine gospel language is

a reference to the cross) both indicate, God's intervention to save his people through the cross of Jesus.

The serpent of bronze made by Moses upon God's order as a healing tool for those who had been bitten by poisonous serpents is found today in the book of Numbers, which is the fourth book of five along with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy that make the Torah or Pentateuch.

This lesson from the book of Numbers 21:4-9 offers a different perspective of the relationship with God that requires personal responsibility and exclusive trust. When these components of the spiritual life are lacking, it is highly possible to fall into sin. In a rare manner, this passage of Numbers shows a punishment from God that we can consider excessive and incomprehensible for the God of love which we imagine he is. "Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died." This lesson is difficult to explain and brings controversy and division especially for us contemporary believers that want to acknowledge or relate only to a God of love without punishments for us or requirements from us.

As we heard and concluded last week from the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus (20:1-17) and the cleaning of the Temple in the gospel of John (2:13-22), the relationship with God depends much in the human answer and behavior of trust and commitment than in any other factor. God has, is, and will be the same always: truthful, faithful, caring, loving, etc., with us and all people. These attributes and many others of his divinity do not exclude the personal responsibility and ownership of the thoughts, words, and actions that each person have.

Even if there are multiple interpretations for this text of the book of Numbers, I would like to point the excess of grace and forgiveness that this lesson offers. The Israelites “became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses” they complained about the food and their freedom. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” At this point in the story of Israel, they are a free people, God has delivered, lead and provided many times and in different ways for their needs. The book of Numbers tells us their travel to the promised land and shows their disobedience and lack of faith. Today’s lesson is only a minimal part, over and over God rescues them and allows them to continue on their journey.

When they recognize their sins, they ask for forgiveness. “The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” And God did send the healing the Israelites asked for by ordering Moses to make a serpent and place it on a pole showing that God’s nature of mercy is without limits for them when they repent and acknowledge their wrongdoings and selfish behavior. All this physical pain could have been avoided if from the beginning they had believed and trusted in God. It is possible to be close to the Promise Land and choose to continue in the wilderness of disobedience, or to be free and continue with the desires of being slaves in Egypt. This is the biblical story since the book of Genesis and until today. If we trust and obey God, the human life has purpose and freedom; and if we choose differently, we become slaves of our own desires and the purpose is reduced to a selfish project without God.

Continuing with the emphasis in personal choices, we hear in the gospel the final judgment is the result of people’s actions more than their dependence on God: “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

Nicodemus the Pharisee which Jesus calls the teacher of Israel, visits Jesus by night. He is a seeker of God and wants to know more about Jesus. Today's gospel is part of the conversation Jesus and Nicodemus have. Most of the time we focus our attention on John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." While this verse summarizes the Christian life, it is impossible to extract and disconnect a single verse of the Bible from the whole story of salvation. For our Lenten journey, we hear Jesus saying, "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." Three times in the gospel of John there are texts about Jesus being "lifted up" (3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34). These three times all make direct reference to Jesus' passion and death.

What is unique in chapter 3 is the connection between believing, the cross, and eternal life. "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already." Believing is not the simplistic attitude of accepting him. In Sacred Scripture, to "believe" requires placing our trust in him, obeying him, and following him in his way of life including the way of the cross before eternal life.

Now, let us look back on the conclusions shared at the beginning of this sermon:

1. Our salvation is by grace in Jesus the gift from God, he loved the world so much that he gave his only Son for us.
2. To receive eternal life, we need to believe.
3. The love of God for his creation works according with God's omnipotent, omniscient, and infinite omnipresence that we cannot explain because it is contrary to our standards of love.

It is necessary to recognize that the human responsibility is in believing and accepting and understanding that faith is also a human choice that responds to God's initiative.

As we continue our Lenten journey, take the opportunity to focus on accepting Jesus as the very gift from God. Remember that in giving us Jesus, God gave us Himself in all his glory and power. Pay attention to what the collect prayer asks for today: "*that he may live in us, and we in him*" and show to others how you are in communion with God through your actions and love for them. Amen.