

Lifting Up in a Fallen World

Texts: Numbers 21:4-9; St. John 3:14-21

There are times when reading the Old Testament that its antiquity, the fact that parts of it were written not one or even two but three thousand years ago, is inescapably brought home to us. Such is our experience for example, when reading in *Genesis* the story of Jacob who, when his father-in-law promised him all the striped and speckled sheep of his flock, stuck a striped stick in front of all the breeding sheep so that when the lambs were born all of them were striped or speckled. Such also is our experience I suspect when reading this morning's account of how Moses dealt with the poisonous serpents that the Hebrews encountered in the wilderness before entering the promised land. For, we are told, Moses made the image of a poisonous serpent in bronze and set it on a pole, and whenever anyone was bitten by a poisonous serpent all he had to do was look upon it in order to be saved and to live.

These are truly ancient stories. Biblical scholars confidently claim that they reflect the various religious practices of a very ancient world, practices such as sympathetic magic or the serpent magic that was practiced in ancient Egypt during the time of the Exodus. To us, and to biblical scholars, too, they simply appear as ancient superstition. If these stories are trying to convince us that God works in such magical ways, then, we think, they are superstition pure and simple. No sane herpetologist would ever take the image of a bronze serpent with him into the wild instead of a snake bit kit, and neither would any of us.

But that may not be all that those stories are saying. For early Christian writers, stories like this, and, indeed, virtually all stories in the Old Testament, had another meaning. These writers argued that whatever happens in the Old Testament finds its fulfillment and meaning in the New Testament. Thus you always have to interpret the Old in light of the New. In the case of

Moses and the bronze serpent he lifted up in the wilderness, they especially had very good reason to think this. Jesus himself says so. When instructing Nicodemus, he tells him: “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.” In short, looking upon the serpent lifted up in the wilderness is a symbol that points to the salvation of believers who look upon the Son of Man lifted up on the cross. Thus the church father of the fourth century, Ephrem the Syrian, argued: “Just as those who looked with bodily eyes at the thing which Moses fastened on the cross lived bodily, so too those who look with spiritual eyes at the body of the Messiah nailed and suspended on the cross and believe in him will live spiritually.”

The point that those who interpreted the Old Testament this way wanted to get across is a very important one, namely, that in the history of salvation there is but one source of salvation, and that is Christ. Christ is what the prophets pointed to, Christ is the ultimate reason for the promise that God made to Abraham, Christ is the one who is the light to the Gentiles and the desire of all the nations. From the beginning of the world his being lifted up, his crucifixion is what God intended for the salvation of the world. Thus, they argued, there are not two stories of salvation – the Old one and the New one, but one continuous one. And, thus, they argued, it was not sympathetic magic or serpent magic that saved the people in the wilderness, but the Cross of Christ, even though Christ’s crucifixion did not take place for another twelve hundred years. What makes every symbol a living symbol is Christ’s living presence attached to it, both Calvin and St. Augustine thought.

Their reading is, I think, terrifically important for us. On the one hand, it keeps us from superstition, from thinking that ancient or modern magic is actually effective and real or that God is a magician. We need to see that such stories are a veiled symbol of what really saves us and

that isn't magic. On the other hand, it also keeps us from rationalism, from thinking that there is nothing but superstition in the Old Testament and its strange stories and that they can be dismissed out of hand by our enlightened superiority. We need to recognize that there really is something behind such stories. And finally, such a reading keeps us from misreading the Old Testament as a whole and the promises of God that we find there. It is not just about the promise to the people about freedom and a land, it is also about a promise of a very different sort of kingdom. Thus we need to recognize that behind the struggles of the Israelites to gain and hold the promised land, there is a struggle to realize a far greater kingdom, a struggle that is ours also. That may keep us from a narrow sort of nationalism, of believing that God's kingdom can ever be identified with any kingdom on earth.

There is also one more side to this connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament that is important for us to realize. Just as the New Testament may keep us from misreading the Old in narrow, nationalistic or superstitious ways, the Old in its physical, daily struggles with enemies, whether they are serpents or the enemies that beset Israel internally or externally, can keep us from misreading the New Testament. It keeps us from ever thinking that the Cross and the faith that we have in it are things that have nothing to do with the very hard and real struggles of real people who live in this world. It keeps us from ever turning Christian spirituality into some airy fairy affair, or the Cross into a piece of costume jewelry.

Here I would ask you to think about the verse John 3:16 which we read just a few moments ago: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever should believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life." There is probably no verse in the whole Bible that is so well known. It may be the only verse that most people actually can quote reasonably accurately upon hearing the number. More to the point, if any single verse sums

up what we know of God and God's love for us, it is this one. It is beautiful in language and in content. I myself learned it forty years ago from singing it in a youth choir in the anthem taken from John Stainer's oratorio *The Crucifixion*. We sang it during Wednesday night Lenten services in the church in which I grew up, and I cannot to this day think of the verse without humming Stainer's simple and haunting tune that went with the text. It has never seemed to me that it is inappropriate or misplaced to remember it that way for the content demands music.

But also consider the fate of this verse in the world. For well nigh thirty years or more signs reading simply "John 3:16" have popped up at virtually every sporting event, and now pretty much any event that is covered by television cameras. It is a trend that began with a young hippy with rainbow colored hair who managed to sneak into sporting events all across the country. Perhaps that evangelical fervor has something admirable to it, but at this point, I, at least, find it somewhat irritating and even somewhat blasphemous, for it in the end makes the proposition "that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" into something trivial that never engages the real world.

Think about it this way. Most of us do have a sense of the integrity of holy things, and a sense of when and where it is appropriate to talk about them. While it is often maintained that religion and politics are not appropriate subjects for polite conversation because they tend to be divisive and cause arguments, most people also have a sense that they are not appropriate topics for party chatter because polite conversation is not meant to be very deep; it is meant to be simply sociable. It is therefore inappropriate to bring up truly important matters of the heart in such situations. To do so is, in a sense, taking the Lord's name in vain, because whereas the Lord's name is one of awe, it is now introduced into a conversation of polite and sociable trivialities. Such is what has happened with "John 3:16." To have as its ever present context

battles between local sports teams trivializes it, and blurs the distinction between reality and virtual reality. The battle between good and evil signified by “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son” is not on the same level as the battle between the Giants and the Redskins, just as an international war isn’t. It is a cosmic battle, one in which people suffer and die, it is a battle in which the Son does undergo a real and degrading death, and it is a battle between real good and real evil.

That is where it is important to make and to understand the Old Testament context. If the lifting of the bronze serpent in the wilderness points to a salvation found in the lifting up of Jesus’ broken body on the Cross, the Cross also points back to the real struggle of Old Testament history. The help and salvation that the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness of Sinai needed was commensurate with the dangers inherent in that wandering. They were in a desert. There was little or no food or water except what God provided miraculously. They were surrounded by serpents and wild beasts that saw them as food. There were enemies who had pursued them into that wilderness and enemies who would seek destroy them as they marched toward the promised land. These were not people who needed help and faith as an accessory to a life lived largely without struggle, or people who needed only as much faith as comes from reading a sign at an entertainment event. They needed help and real faith to live.

I don’t worry a lot about the fact that we have a hard time taking seriously the curative value of looking upon a bronze serpent to save us from serpents; but I do worry a lot about the fact that we no longer believe, as the Hebrews in the wilderness were forced to believe, that we are ever in much danger and that our lives and souls hang in the balance. To the degree that we cannot believe that there is a real struggle in life in which our souls hang in the balance is also the degree to which we cannot understand what exactly it means to say that “God so loved the

world that he gave his only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” That is the degree to which we do not understand what it means to give an only begotten Son. That is the degree to which “God so loved the world” is *only* music.

We live in a fallen world, and the serpents still are very much with us. We don't necessarily encounter them every day, nor do we usually experience them as a mass invasion. But we are very much aware that they are there; or, at least, sooner or later we become aware of them. They come in the illnesses and weaknesses that still beset human life, despite our best preventative health care and medicine, despite the music we sing and the slogans, religious and otherwise, that we quote to ward them off. They encounter us in difficult people, and in people who wish us no good. They come upon us in those whom we love who are in the sort of trouble that they reject help, for often the people who need help most are the ones least likely to seek it out or accept it. They come in our moral decisions when doing the right thing is not only difficult but actually something that will set back and undo our most cherished human projects. They come upon us as we are at the mercy of the powerful whose self interest threatens us in our vulnerability. Like the Hebrews wandering in the desert we need something that will deliver us; we need something lifted up to look upon that we might be saved. We don't need a slogan; we need a real savior for we are often in real trouble.

The Cross, Christ's being lifted up, is that salvation. It is real salvation for real trouble, but it is also a real death, and a real death that comes at the end of the fangs of the serpents that beset us. Jesus was not simply a martyr for truth, as one philosopher put it, nor was his death an unfortunate mistake or tragedy that was quickly set right by the resurrection. God in giving his only begotten Son, gave his Son to a world that is too often filled with serpents. He really gave him up, and he really died. Looking on him is what really saves us.

In Reformed churches, such as Presbyterian churches, when we display the Cross, we typically display it as empty. The reasoning for this is that Christ has died once and for all, and that Christ is now risen. He is no longer on the Cross. Thinking that way is true and right. But we do need to be aware that the Cross was not always empty, and in that sense Catholic-style crucifixes in which the broken body of the man of sorrows hangs there lifted up for us to gaze upon are something for us to look at. They are reminders of how much has been done for us and they are reminders of our sufferings and the God who shares them with us. They do have something to teach us about what it means to say that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. And they do have something to teach us, therefore, about what it really means to say that “whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

As we go through the Christian life, surely we can have confidence that faith is the beginning of everlasting life. We can have confidence that there is a resurrection. But we also need to be aware that to get to resurrection we, as also the one whom we believe in, do go through death and a world beset by serpents. Faith in Christ does not avoid them, it does not magically make them disappear, but it does believe and act as if their bite is not fatal. It allows us to encounter them, and to live through them and even despite them. As we now go through the season of Lent, pointed to our observation of Easter, let us also keep our eyes fixed firmly on the one who was lifted up, for it is by gazing upon him that we are saved in the wilderness.