

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018

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Numbers 21:4-9
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

Look Up and Live

So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. – Numbers 21:9



Romanesque crucifix in the Fuentiduena Chapel in the Cloisters, NYC. Photo by Rick Morley

I didn't forget the Old Testament reading...I'll get to it in a minute. First I'd like to think about a literary classic.

Oscar Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* at the end of the 19th century, about a tortured man who was unable to look honestly at his life. Gray was a handsome, talented man who appears to have everything – power, wealth, influence, but not love, not kindness. In the story, he agrees to let artist, Basil Hallward, paint a portrait of him, which turns out to be splendid; it is as attractive as Gray himself.

One day Dorian looks up and sees that the portrait has changed. The eyes and the face are different; they have aged. While Dorian Gray continues to live his life in utter self-absorption, he appears to pay no physical and emotional price for it. Dorian never ages, but his portrait grows more and more haggard and grotesque. The picture shows Dorian as he truly is, the self he is unwilling to acknowledge.

Oscar Wilde was a brilliant writer. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes a great Lenten story for us; it's a metaphor for our journey too, as we travel with Jesus to the cross. Lent is a quiet season, a time set aside to examine ourselves, to confess our faults and fears, our selfishness and our lack of trust. Lent is a time to consider our inner lives – and our deep need for God.

Dorian Gray's story ends in tragedy because he is unable to see himself as he truly is -- a narcissist who can't repent, though he is deeply in need of grace, flawed and fragile, as we all

are. During Lent we Christians try to look honestly at ourselves, and examine our lives – everything – from our relationships with family, friends, the earth, our colleagues, neighbors, to our all-important relationship with God. That’s hard, painful work. Sometimes we just don’t feel up to it. We *say* we’ll do it on Ash Wednesday, when we mark each other with ashes and declare our need for God. We mean to -- examine our lives, and we try, but sometimes it’s just too scary, too hard, and we end up giving up chocolate instead.

Dorian Gray is a weird, scary story, but not nearly as weird and frightening as today’s Old Testament lesson. It comes from the time of the Hebrew people’s Exodus from Egypt, when God brought them out of slavery, “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”ⁱ You probably know that their escape from Egypt took a long time – 40 years. In Bible-speak that means a really long time spent in the wilderness. They suffered from lack of water and food. Every time – when the situation seemed hopeless, God would come through – every time. God would provide – water from a rock, manna from heaven, quail.

But that never seemed to satisfy them. The more God gave, the more they wanted. Instead of helping Moses, they fussed and complained – which had to get old. They muttered against Moses and God. Finally, when they were on God’s last nerve, “God sent poisonous snakes.” I know. This is too weird to NOT be true. Think Indiana Jones: “Why did it have to be snakes?”

Here’s the reading from Numbers, chapter 21

“From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way.⁵ The people spoke against God and against Moses, “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.”⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.⁷ 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.” So Moses prayed for the people.⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”⁹ So Moses made a serpent

of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”

A poisonous snake made of bronze lifted up on a pole as a source of healing and protection. What is that? Were the snakes that infested the camp punishment from God for the Hebrew people’s lack of faith? They thought so. The congregation came to Moses in repentance. That was right. Like Dorian Gray they had responded to their fear by focusing on themselves, on their own needs and wants. They forgot the saving work that God was doing through them in the world. And they were sorry.

So Moses prayed for the people, and God heard and answered their prayer in the strangest way! This could not be more surprising. God said “Take one of those vessels, and hammer it ... into an image of a serpent.”ⁱⁱ Methodist pastor, Grace Imathiu said,

“Can you hear it? I can hear it out in the desert. I bet ... Moses used a rock to [hammer] ... that brass vessel flattening it, cutting it into the image of a serpent. Can you hear it? Bang, bang, bang. He’s making medicine.... It sounds like nails on a cross... He is making the image of a serpent.

And God said, ‘Tie this image on a pole.’ I can see him tying it onto his staff. And God said, ‘Hold it high and run around the camp and say, “Look! Look!” And anyone who looks at that bronze serpent on a pole will be saved.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Isn’t this the strangest, most surprising thing? What is even more astounding is that it works! The people look up, they see the symbol of their sin, and they are healed.

That story must have been passed down from generation to generation, because fifteen hundred years later Jesus calls on this same story while talking to a man named Nicodemus. Have you heard of him? He was a leading member of the community in Jerusalem, probably a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. He came at night (light and darkness are very important in John’s gospel) asking questions of Jesus, questions about his miracles; he called them “signs,” which is a good word because they point to God’s presence in Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of God, God’s incarnation – God’s “only Son.”

Then Jesus uses this really famous and confusing metaphor about being born anew, born of water and the Spirit, born again. Nicodemus, whose first career must have been as an engineer, says, “that’s not feasible.” And Jesus laughs and says, “Here you are one of the wisest people in all of Israel, and you don’t know that I’m talking about spiritual rebirth.”

This is the way John remembers it in chapter 3, verses 14-21.

Jesus said, “And 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.

“For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

“Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

Thank you, Healing God. Thank you for this season of Lent when you invite us to come to you and examine our lives, and be healed, renewed, even born again. As we prepare to walk with Jesus to the cross, speak to us today from your word. Startle us with your transforming love. Fix our eyes, not on the instrument of torture and death, but on the one hanging there, the one who so loved the world that he was willing to die and be raised for our sake. In the name of the one who is our Savior, our hope and our future we pray. Amen.

Sometimes we need snakes, or a strange portrait that changes, or cancer or news stories that grab us by the throat. We need these things to remind us who we are and why we are here. These fearsome things... they bite and sting...and in the end, they remind us of our need for God.

They humble us and restore us to our first job – which is to be transforming lives as ambassadors for Jesus Christ, God making an appeal through us.”^{iv}

There were three men who lived on a ranch out west, so the story goes. The father, John, had two sons, Jake and Joe. They never had any use for God or the church, until one day Jake was bitten by a rattlesnake. They rushed Jake to the hospital, but the venom was powerful; Jake was in bad shape.

So John sent for the preacher. When the preacher arrived the family naturally asked her to offer a prayer for Jake. She prayed:

“God we give you thanks
that you sent this snake to bite Jake.
It has brought him to seek you.
We ask, Lord, that you would send another snake
to bite Joe,
and a really big one to bite the old man,
so that they, too, might seek after you.
We thank you for your providence
and ask that you would send among us
bigger and better snakes.”^v

Grace Imathiu imagines Moses like a siren, moving with his serpent pole, moving among the people crying, “Look up! Look up [and live].”^{vi} But that is hard. When we are in Jake’s situation, it’s very hard to tear our eyes away from snakes, or anything else that bites, anything that hurts us. Even when someone says, “Look up!” And you’ve been hurt, and the injury swells, you focus more and more on yourself, on your fear and pain.

You know this is not just about snake bites; it’s about everything that hurts. “The things your mother said, the things your father did or didn’t do. Those disappointments, diseases, wrongs, injuries, regrets. All snakebites. It is as if we are hypnotized by them. We cannot seem to stop looking at them. Snakebites.”^{vii} After a while they are like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We look all right on the outside, but on the inside those snakebites distort and destroy us.

It's hard to imagine that pain can be our friend. And it's not, unless it causes us to look up.

There is something very powerful about this story. Fifty-seven generations later (I counted) the Hebrew people were still telling that story. They remembered what God did through Moses in the wilderness. Jesus and Nicodemus knew the story. Jesus tells Nicodemus that God is going to do something like this again. The Son of Man is going to be lifted up in the same way that Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness to heal and restore us – if we will look up:

“For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Saved. Saved from the venom of this world. Saved by looking up. Saved for a purpose.

This strange story says that God uses the symbol of the problem as the solution to the problem. That is exactly what God does on Calvary. On Calvary we have to tear our eyes away from the thing that terrifies us most – death – and look up. Look up and live! And when we do, we find the path to eternal life. Because of the cross, because of the one who was lifted up -- death, like the snakebites, no longer has power over us. God, not death, has the last word.

And God's final word is life. Eternal life. Resurrection life. It is important to remember that as Christians we do not worship the cross. As Christians we worship the one who went to the cross for our sake.

“For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Now let's stand and say what we believe...

ⁱ Deuteronomy 26:8

ⁱⁱ Grace Imathiu, “Look Up!” *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, March 15, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} 2 Corinthians 5:20

^v David Leininger, “The Presbyterian Pulpit” March 22, 2009

^{vi} Imathiu, *op.cit.*

^{vii} *ibid*