

Lent 4 B 2018

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Of all the sermons I knew I wasn't going to preach today  
From among the infinite variety of sermons  
That could flow forth,  
Legitimately or not,  
From the scriptures we have been given for today,  
Of all the sermons I knew I wasn't going to preach,  
There's only one I'm going to venture after all.

I'm still not going to preach 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 have eternal life.

I'm still not going to preach about the wilderness,  
Much as I love it.  
I'm still not going to preach about judgment,  
Tempting as it is to unpack the meaning of the word.

But  
I am, believe it or not,  
Going to invite you to wonder with me  
About the snake on the stick.

I was not expecting to say these words,  
But I am.  
The snake on the stick, though mysterious to us,  
Made total sense  
At the time of the wandering in the wilderness,  
And even at the time of Jesus.  
It was – and remains –  
A clear example of  
Sympathetic magic.  
Sympathetic magic of a particular kind  
Called apotropaic –  
A word you're not expected to know,  
Or spell, or pronounce.  
More about that later.  
For now,

Let's just think about magic.

You don't have to believe in magic  
To learn about it.  
You don't have to keep our ancestors,  
Who did believe in magic,  
At a distance.  
We share their joys and fears.  
We share their hopes.  
We have different ways of trying to keep the darkness at bay,  
Different ways of trying to protect  
The people and things we love.  
Just as our ancestors' beliefs and customs  
Seem naïve or harsh to us,  
So in times to come,  
Much of what we do  
May look quaint to those who come after us.

So let's take this snake magic seriously,  
Just for a moment.  
That doesn't mean pretending  
We think it might work –  
Though no one is telling you  
You can't think it might work.  
Let's just take seriously  
That there have been many times and places  
Where this kind of magic mattered.

And then,  
Wonder with me,  
For a little while,  
Whether the magic of the snake on the stick,  
The sympathetic magic,  
Apotropaic in nature,  
Offers us any insights  
Into the mystery of the Incarnation,  
As we come closer,  
In the fourth week of Lent,  
To the mystery of the cross.

Sympathetic magic works on the principle  
That like produces like.  
Honey makes you sweet.  
Rocks make you strong.

Apotropaic magic “turns aside”

The evil intentions or curses  
Of our ill-wishers.

If you're ever knocked on wood,  
Or thrown salt over your shoulder,  
Then the old customs and beliefs  
Still linger in you.

The snake on the stick,  
Crafted by Moses to save the Israelites  
From the plague they've brought on themselves  
By whining, complaining,  
Failing to acknowledge and give thanks  
For the miraculous gifts of the God  
Who spreads a table in the wilderness,  
The snake on a stick  
Is a piece of apotropaic sympathetic magic.

The snake keeps the people  
From dying of snakebite.

Now, we could question this.  
We could be like the children of Israel in the desert,  
Complaining about having to eat the miserable food  
That rains down from heaven.  
We could say,  
Why not make a snake that drives the snakes away?  
Why do the people still have to get bitten?

Well,  
You don't need me to tell you,  
Life is like that.  
There are snakes, and they bite.  
The question is, are they going to kill us?

That's where we need  
Our own version of  
Apotropaic sympathetic magic.

Like produces like.  
Harm can ward off harm.

Now, what are we supposed to do  
With this fun fact?  
Are we supposed to believe it really worked that way?  
Dismiss it as totally irrelevant?

Or let it, perhaps,  
Open a door for us  
Into one of the great mysteries  
Of our faith.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,  
So the Son of Man must be lifted up.  
Lifted high upon the cross.

There are many ways to approach the meaning of the cross,  
A mystery that we will never fully understand.

But if we choose to take seriously the figure of the serpent  
Lifted up in the wilderness,  
It might teach us something about ourselves  
In relation to the one  
Who came among us  
As one of us,  
Lived our life,  
And let our death  
Have its way with him.

I'm not saying,  
Just to be clear,  
I'm not saying this is magic.

I'm saying looking at Jesus on the cross,  
Lifted up,  
While remembering the strange story  
Of the snake on the stick,  
And saying to ourselves,  
Like produces like,  
Might make us wonder,  
What does the sign of the cross  
Do within us?

How does it cure us?

If we look at the Jesus on the cross,  
And have even a glimmer of understanding  
Of what is happening,  
Then in some mysterious way,  
Like produces like.  
Self-offering  
Brings forth self-offering.  
Revelation brings forth revelation.

Forgiveness brings forth forgiveness.

Suffering happens,  
And perhaps brings forth suffering.

But the central mystery of the cross  
Is the revelation of divine glory  
In the pouring forth of life.  
Not suffering.  
Not death.  
The revelation of divine glory  
In the pouring forth of life.  
God reveals the divine self on the cross,  
And calls us to encounter the mystery.

Like can produce like.

Maybe not by magic,  
But by inspiration,  
Encouragement,  
Grace.

We can become like the one  
Who became one of us.

Self-offering.  
Self-revealing.  
Forgiving.

Like produces like.

But what does that mean,  
At a time like this?

In our own community,  
We face choices about who we want to be,  
How we want to act.  
We face decisions that call into question  
Our values and vision.

In our country,  
We hear outcry on all sides of every issue.  
Lives are at stake,  
Values are at stake, and it seems there is no clear way forward.

These messes are not punishment,

But they are punishing.

How can a vision of the cross keep us from harm,  
Or keep us from dying of the harm?

How can a vision of the cross  
Awaken in us  
A renewal of hope,  
An outpouring of love,  
And an inbreaking, a fireworks of joy?

Because if that's not what's happening,  
Then why are we here?

If we are not a people of hope and love,  
Then what do we have to offer?  
And what about Joy?

It is joy that is the surest sign of the presence of God.  
Joy – the sign of this Sunday.  
Rose Sunday.  
A day of lightness.  
A day for remembering the deepest mystery.

Joy does not ignore anger and resentment.  
It overwhelms them.  
Joy does not drown in pain and suffering.  
It cannot;  
It runs deeper and wider than any sorrow.

Guilt? Shame? Despair?  
How can they contend with joy?  
They can try,  
But if we look at the cross,  
And Jesus lifted high,  
And let ourselves be one with him there,  
As he is only there to be one with us,  
Then how could we not be in God's presence –  
And so feel joy  
Even in the midst of pain.

This was not the sermon  
I was expecting to preach.

I started out with a snake,  
Found myself at the cross,

And ended in joy.

I must have looked at the snake on a stick.

I invite you to join me.

It won't bite.

But even if it does – you will live.