

Lent 4 B 2021

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Long ago,  
Deep in the heart of the wilderness,  
Miles and weeks away from a resupply of fresh food,  
Running low on fresh water,  
I thought I would lose my mind  
Listening to the campers complain  
About the food.

Just like the children of Israel in the wilderness,  
They told me they hated this miserable food.  
I tried, alone in my tent,  
To remember what my wise mentors had always said,  
Be thankful when they complain about the food.  
That means everything else is alright.

But it didn't work for me.  
I did not, as far as I remember,  
pray for poisonous snakes to come and bite my campers,  
But I grew weary of their murmuring.

Of course their murmuring looks a little different now.  
All of us have murmured a bit,  
As we wandered through the wilderness of the past year.  
Even if we have had plenty to eat,  
And none of it miserable food,  
Most of us have looked back with longing  
To what used to be called  
The fleshpots of Egypt,  
The fond memories of an earlier time,  
An earlier time that actually had plenty of its own severe challenges –  
But we long for it all the same.

When the children of Israel complained about the miserable food,  
God sent poisonous snakes to bite them,  
And they died.  
Don't get hung up on theology here,  
On questions of whether God sends poisonous snakes.  
Just for a moment.  
Roll with the story,

So that you can get to the snake on the stick.  
But once we get there,  
It's hard not to get stuck.  
What on earth is going on  
With the sign of the serpent lifted up?

This strange story,  
By some unaccountable mystery,  
Leads us into one of the great proclamations  
of the heart of the Christian faith.  
God loved the world so much;  
God loved the world like this:  
Giving the only son.  
Responding in faith to God's loving action  
Is the gift of eternal life.

We can understand this gospel truth  
Without the snake on a stick,  
But since it's there,  
Right in front of our eyes,  
We might wonder about it together.

Maybe in these wilderness times,  
As we reach another stage  
Of our wandering journey  
Through plague and heartache and quarreling,  
Maybe in these times,  
Looking at the snake on a stick  
Might offer us a new perspective  
On a truth that will always mystify us,  
The truth of the cross.

Let's see.

Let's see  
Whether the magic of the snake on the stick,  
Offers us any insights  
As we come closer,  
In the fourth week of Lent,  
To the mystery of the cross.

Technically, the snake on a stick is magic;  
It works on the principle  
That like produces like.  
Honey makes you sweet.  
Rocks make you strong.

And it's also a magic that turns harm aside.

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  
keeps the people  
From dying of snakebite.

Now, we could murmur about 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 plagues,  
And they turn our world upside down.  
There are bitter divisions  
Tearing our common life apart.  
There are snakes, and they bite.  
The question is, are they going to kill us?  
And if they do,  
Is death the end?

The sign of the serpent tells us  
Like produces like.  
Harm can ward off harm.  
And somehow, that's like the cross.

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 mystery of the cross

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 mystery 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 there,  
Then in some mysterious way,  
Like produces like.  
He offers himself,  
And reveals the glory of God.  
Self-offering  
Brings forth self-offering.  
Revelation brings forth revelation.  
Forgiveness brings forth forgiveness.

Suffering happens too,  
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 profound mystery.

This mystery:  
The cross is the sign of life,  
And not of death.

The cross is the sign of our life.

If we are in relationship with the one  
Who is truly, completely human,  
If we are in relationship with Jesus the Christ,  
And are by a great mystery empowered to become like him,  
Then like him we live in a new world  
Where death is not the end.

God so loved the world,  
That by a mystery beyond our knowing,  
The cross that is lifted up  
Is the place where God's life joins ours,  
And ours joins God's, forever.  
The place that could be a sign of our utter hopelessness,  
Our complete inability to get it right,  
Becomes instead the sign  
Of hope.

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

Because if that's not what's happening,  
If we are not overcome  
By hope, and love, and joy,  
Then why are we here?  
Why did we stick with it  
Through a year in the wilderness  
And why do we long to return from exile?

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

Like produces like.  
Can we become the world we hope for?  
Can we, in our lives,  
Bear witness  
To the sign of Jesus on the cross?  
Our times call for truth telling,  
Because there have been so many lies.  
Our times call for compassion,  
Because there has been so much hatred.  
For courage,

Because there is so much to do.

And what about joy?  
Joy does not ignore anger and resentment.  
It overwhelms them.  
Joy does not drown in pain and suffering.  
It overpowers them;  
It runs deeper and wider than any sorrow.

There have been so many efforts  
To keep joy alive this past year.  
Some of them have even worked.  
But what about the joy that isn't work?

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

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 we are in God's presence –  
And so we are in joy.

If we look at the cross,  
Can we become what we long for,  
And be a sign to the world?