

Church of the Resurrection, Centerville – Lent 4B (3/22/2009) – sermon by Ruth Eller

*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.* (John 3:14)

Yes, I know that this passage continues with the Biggie—that cryptic message written on poster board and waved over the stands in a stadium—or engraved on license plates—or stamped on T-shirts .

I say “cryptic”, because if you didn’t know already, whatever would the words “John 3:16” mean to you? Of course *we* know it—“*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.*” But what does that mean? And how are going to use it: to beat people up?—or welcome them home?

We were thinking a bit about idolatry last week. You know, we can make idols even out of scripture—and I can think of no better example of that than those signs raised high in the bleachers. How ironic! Scripture speaks of the Son of Man himself being lifted up. And the Son of Man’s followers lift up a name (not even *his* name) and a few numbers. So for the moment let’s leave John 3:16 behind and revisit the whole passage in which it is embedded.

The basic reference goes back to the time of the Exodus, of the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert after their escape from slavery in Egypt. This is, I remind you, well over a thousand years before the time of Jesus. This rescue from oppression and the forty-years’ journey through the wilderness were the crucible in which the children of Israel were refined into a people with one God and a common set of values.

A recurring theme in this saga is the grumbling of the people. They’ve been saved in some miraculous way at the Red Sea, they’ve been given bread from heaven and water from the rock—and still, things aren’t quite right for them. They are, in other words, typical human beings. It does seem, doesn’t it, that no matter how much we have we just can’t help hankering after more? In fact, it’s often seems that the more you have, the more you have. Even \$ 53,000 a week (yes, that’s a week) won’t be enough for the Swedish countess now divorcing her CEO husband. (Well, they do live in New York.)

Even for those in more moderate circumstances, sometimes it takes something really nasty to remind us of how lucky we are. Something like—snakes. Poisonous snakes, that is. The way the old Israelites saw it, nothing happened that couldn’t be traced ultimately to God. So as they tell the story, God sends snakes as a little suggestion that there are a lot worse things in life than boring cuisine.

Now we have a little of what anthropologists call sympathetic magic. Following God’s instructions, Moses makes a bronze snake and attaches it to his staff and sets it up so everyone can look at it. And when they look at this snake that has been lifted up, they are safe from snakebite. (This, by the way, is the classic emblem of the healing professions—although it’s become confused with the symbol of the messenger god Mercury, with his winged staff and two snakes intertwined.)

Great story. Not just for the fun and drama of it, but for the theology behind. Because yet again we have a narrative illustration of a core belief of the Jewish and Christian traditions. That is, that no matter how poorly we behave, God will always love us and find an antidote for the poison in our hearts.

But what does this story have to do with Jesus? Is John's gospel comparing Jesus to a venomous serpent?

Well, in a way, yes. The way the story about Moses and the snakes works is this: If you have trouble with snakes on the ground, put one up on a pole so people can look at it and be healed. Maybe the gospel according to John is saying that if you are having trouble with *human beings* on the ground, lift one of those up to look at.

Here's another angle. What kinds of things do we need to look at when we're frightened? Any therapist can tell you—we need to look at what scares us. The pop-psych phrase is “facing our fears”.

It's easy to see how the snakes might symbolize our fears of all that might hurt us, or things that have hurt us in the past. But there are also all kinds of things *inside* us that make us squirm. We may not want to think about them, but ignoring them will not make them go away.

The gospel passage goes on to talk about light and darkness: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.”

Strange but true, this is something else we might fear—light itself. Darkness can feel safer. Getting things out into the open is scary. Really good people are open and honest, of course. But goodness is a threat, isn't it? It's hard to deal with someone you suspect is better than yourself. They are a kind of living reproach. Because if they can do it...well, how about you? The best thing to do is get rid of them. Either literally, or just by ignoring them. Burying all thought of them, deep down with the other things that make you squirm.

But suppose rather than ignoring that reproachful goodness, you lifted it up instead? Suppose you gave into the thing that was really frightening you all along? The idea that you're actually attracted to this goodness, to this light—and what you're really afraid of is that you can't have it, or reflect it, or be it—that you won't ever measure up? That you don't have it in you to be that unselfish? Or that you just can't afford to be that way? (After all, it takes every penny of that \$ 53,000 just to make ends meet!)

And more frightening still: Suppose you looked at such a Good One and realized that you loved him, that all you actually wanted or needed in the world was to be loved in return? What then?

Ah—here it is. The Good News. Because looking up at that figure, you would know that the ultimate goodness has already taken the first step in fulfilling your desire, meeting your need: “For God so loved the world...” Not because the world was behaving itself—but just because it was there to be loved. Like yourself.

And what about those words that suggest this life he offers is only for some special elite, those who “believe in him”? Again, it helps to put things in context. Remember that the one who is lifted up is not just the historical Jesus. According to John, this is the very One “by whom all things were made”, the Word who was with God and was God since before time began.

In other words, this particular “Son of Man” is actually the human face of the huge, incomprehensible force that created the universe. So is it not possible that there are many, many ways of trusting in that One? Furthermore, the same passage which could be heard to condemn also says (right after John 3:16!) he came *not* “to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” True, those who reject

the light condemn themselves—but identifying such people isn't our concern. Our concern is with the way *we* have been called. We Christians are the ones for whom the light and the goodness of the world is lifted up on Calvary. We really don't need to use these words to judge anyone else.

So at this stopping-place in our Lenten journey, we look ahead to the cross. We are asked to look up at that figure, that human being who is the antidote for the darkness and the poison of humanity. This is God's way of loving the world, he says—bigger than anything you can imagine. Trust it. Trust me. Light instead of darkness. Open instead of hidden. Giving instead of taking. Things that last, rather than things that crumble away. Join me. What are you afraid of?

*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.*