

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018

The Mystery of Our Salvation
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

In the night, on the rooftop, Nicodemus talks with Jesus.
Mostly he listens as Jesus answer his questions.
Mostly he is baffled,
as Jesus plumbs the depths of the mystery of the relationship
between God and humanity,
and **the mystery of God's salvation of humankind.**

Jesus speaks of light and darkness,
of birth and rebirth,
of being born from above,
born of water and Spirit,
of the love of God
and power of belief in that love to overcome evil
and to secure the salvation of all who believe.

In the midst of this dialogue,
Jesus uses one of his stranger metaphors
to speak of the mystery of our salvation:
A bronze serpent lifted up on a pole
that Moses fashioned at God's command
to save the people from the poisonous snakes in the desert:
*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.*

Now for many of us
this business about a nest of poisonous snakes
slithering into the desert camp of the Hebrews
is the stuff of nightmares.
"A recent Harris poll on "What We Are Afraid Of"
discovered that 36 percent of all adults in the United States
list snakes as their number one fear...49 percent of women and 22 percent of men."¹

Given this statistic, perhaps I shouldn't tell you about the time (several years ago)
we found a large black snake in the mechanical room downstairs,
directly under this chancel.
It escaped into the drain in the floor.
No idea where it went after that!
We did learn that day
that Tony Pepper is one of those 22 percent of men
who are absolutely terrified of snakes!
Howard recalls that Tony didn't wait for the elevator to get back upstairs.

Since that time,
I like to think that when I rise to preach from this pulpit,
I am treading on the head of the serpent.
Don't worry, I've checked that grate on front of the chancel,
under the communion table...
It's on really tight! ...and again, this was several years ago...

It is probably true
that if it weren't for Jesus' brief reference to it in John's Gospel
this strange story from Numbers would not see the light of day
in the worship of most churches,
except maybe for the snake handling people of Appalachia.

On the surface the image is simple enough:
Moses lifted up a serpent on a pole, and looking to it brought healing.
Jesus was lifted up on a cross, in the resurrection, and in the ascension,
and looking to him brings salvation.
Simple enough,
but the deeper we go, we find more questions than answers.

The people brought the snakes on themselves
by their constant complaining

"The people did not like the bitter water of Marah...
so the Lord showed Moses how to sweeten it.
They complained about the lack of food...
so the Lord gave them manna.
They complained that they were thirsty...
Moses struck the rock at the Lord's command and water gushed forth...
When the march resumed after Sinai, they were back at it again,
asking for meat to eat...
[so] a wind from the Lord brought quails...
The people rebelled at the prospect of invading Canaan..."
and were only saved from God's wrath by the pleading of Moses
on their behalf.²

God has saved them from slavery in Egypt, saved them from hunger, saved them from thirst,
but they are not able to enjoy the life God has provided
because they are ingrates, and only see what they do not have.
They cannot accept with gratitude the gift they have been given.

And finally, in today's reading they go one fatal step further: they *speak against God*.
"Complaining against Moses and Aaron is one thing.
Complaining against God is something else altogether."³

So God sends poisonous snakes slithering into the camp that bite and kill many of the people.
When the people hastily confess their sins and plead for mercy,
Moses intercedes
**and God transforms the instrument of death
into an instrument of healing and life
— that is, an instrument of salvation.**

God commands Moses to fashion a bronze serpent
and lift it up on a pole,
and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.

In ancient times serpents were cultic symbols around the world,
standing for everything from danger and death,
to wisdom and even fertility.

Snake cults were well established in Canaan by the Bronze Age.
But perhaps the best known example from the ancient world is Asclepius,
the Greek god of healing whose symbol was a serpent-entwined rod.
The use of the snake to represent the medical arts is an interesting paradox
alluding to the power of medicine
both to heal and to cause harm.

Later in the story of Israel,
when Hezekiah begins his reforms in Jerusalem
he destroys all the idols and images that tempt the people away from God.
Among other things, we are told,
*He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made,
for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it;
it was called Nehushtan...*

Was this object located in the temple itself?
Did it depict a lesser deity alongside YHWH?
Does the explicit link to [our passage]
suggest that our story began to be told in later years
to explain an object of worship found in the temple?
Were people mistaking the snake on the pole
as a magical agent of healing
and trusting it instead of the true and only Healer?

We cannot answer any of these questions definitively,
but the tentative answer to all of them is yes.¹⁴

It is our human proclivity, is it not,
to take the freely given gift of salvation
and turn it into something we can control, and manipulate to our advantage,
and even wield over others.

140 miles to the north of Mount Hor, stands Mount Nebo, just east of the Dead Sea.

Mt. Nebo is the site from which, according to tradition,
Moses viewed the promised land,
the land God told him he would never enter.

At this site on Mt. Nebo,
in front of a Franciscan friary,
there stands a tall hammered metal sculpture
made by the Florentine artists Giovanni Fantoni.
The sculpture depicts Moses' bronze serpent on a pole.
But it also brings to mind the cross of Christ.
[It is the picture on the front of the bulletin today.]

Whatever we may learn from the complex history of the bronze serpent fashioned by Moses there is no question that Jesus, in the Gospel of John, wants us to understand that his being lifted up on the cross, is for the sake of the healing of the world. He is lifted up so that the world God loves may have eternal life.

This is the mystery of our salvation.

The instrument of death becomes the instrument of life and salvation.

The paradox of the cross is even more potent when we consider the identity of the One lifted up on the cross to suffer death, and lifted up from the grave, to defeat death, and lifted up from the earth to heaven, to reign over all.

The mystery of our salvation by Christ being lifted up has all the elements of the story in the book of Numbers: the sin of the people, which is their failure to trust God; the judgment of God against the people for turning away; the mercy of the long-suffering God who, in the end, offers a way for the people not to perish but to be saved; and the requirement that the people do something to receive this gift, in the older story, look up to the serpent on the pole; in the newer story, believe in the one lifted up on the cross.

And so the mystery of our salvation always has to do with this dynamic relationship of God's grace and our faith. "Throughout the Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, the relationship between God's grace and human faith is one of mutual interaction.

The precise character of the relationship is elusive, ...because it probes the core of the truth about God's relationship with humankind."⁵

Our Call to Worship this morning came from the letter to the Ephesians, in which Paul writes:

*By grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*

And so the watchwords of the Reformation were

sola gratia and *sola fides*,
grace alone and faith alone.

But which one is it?

Is faith purely the gift of God's grace?

Or does it require something from us, some response,
that is genuinely our own?

"If salvation comes by grace alone, is faith redundant?

Or should we say that human faith is generated by God's grace?

If salvation comes through faith alone, is grace superfluous?

Or could we say that God's grace is activated by human faith?"⁶

Is our salvation depended on having enough or the right kind of faith?
Or will God grace us with salvation even when we fail at having faith?

The gospel is clear:

*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.*
God's love is not limited to a few, but extends to all.
Anyone and everyone who believes in the gift of the Son is saved
and has eternal life.

But the gospel is also clear:

*Some people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.
And all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light.
Those who do not believe are condemned already,
because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

So our salvation is a mystery — a cloud of unknowing.

The more we know,
the more we realize that we do not know
and that we cannot comprehend the depth of God and God's ways,
but must trust in the giver of life.

When we come to the end of our logical rope,
when, try as we might, we cannot unravel the tangle of mystery,
when it comes to this moment in the time of our living,
when it comes to this piece of earth where we must put one foot in front of the other,
all these speculations about grace and faith
do us very little good.

We are, all of us, desert-wandering, snake-bitten people, in desperate need of an antidote.
We are, all of us, stumbling around in the dark, in desperate need of light.
We are, all of us, standing under the judgment of the long-suffering God,
who is done with listening to our whining and complaining
who has had it up to here with our ingratitude
yet who in a mysterious mix of divine exasperation and enduring love
has turned what should be the death of us all
into our only hope of salvation.

**The mystery of our salvation is that God has not destroyed us already,
but holds open for us
a way back into healing relationship.**

The cross is no more a magical icon than the bronze serpent on a the pole.
Far from magic, it is reality.
The only reality that matters.

The cross is the love of God poured out for you
and for me
and for all.

In the cross we behold the mystery of our salvation:
the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Look upon him and live.

¹ Taylor, 101

² W. Sibley Towner, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 99

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 99

⁴ Towner, 103

⁵ Joseph D. Small, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 120

⁶ Small, 120