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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/15/2015, The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In his nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus refers to the ancient story of Moses and the serpent in the wilderness. Nicodemus knows the story. Of course he does. He is a teacher of Israel. What Nicodemus does not yet know is the true meaning of that story. It is a meaning that concerns Nicodemus. Indeed, it concerns you and me too. So, Jesus says these words to the man:

¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: ¹⁵That whosoever believeth in him *should not perish*, but have *eternal life*.
(John 3:14-15, KJV)

We are speaking of important matters here—the most important: We are speaking of perishing not, and of eternal life. The key is to look to Jesus, and him crucified. It was the testimony of Saint Paul and must always remain the same:

²For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, *and him crucified*. (1 Corinthians 2:2, KJV)

This story of Moses and the serpent in the wilderness was important to Jesus, and it has always been important to the church. Now, as we near the end of Lent and approach Holy Week, the lectionary asks us to listen once again to this strange story of the Israelites and the lifting up of the bronze serpent. It is a story of salvation. It is a story of suffering. And it is a story that can help us in our daily walk with Christ.

In this sermon, I plan to look at the old story three times, as if with three clicks of the camera. In the first go-round, I want to consider the story in the history of Israel. In the second step, I want to adjust the focus, step back, and consider the story as a story about the church — a church that has been waiting for the Promised Land for two thousand years now. And finally, I want to readjust the focus one more time and look at the story as a story about you, my friends, and about me. I am interested in the *pattern*. Something is afoot in the story of Moses and the serpent in the wilderness. There is a pattern in that story that reaches all the way to you and to me.

FIRST, ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS

So, for the first go-round, let's think of Israel in the wilderness. In their journey in life, the Israelites are midway between slavery and salvation. The problem is, they have been stuck there in the middle for a long time, and they are about worn out. Looking backward in time, they are able to remember the glories of the Exodus. In their future, they are heading toward the Promised Land — a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8). But for now, they are betwixt and between. The wonders of the Red Sea — the way the LORD opened that sea with a strong east wind and created a path through the sea so that the Israelites could pass on over dry shod (Exodus 14:21) — well, those wonders are memories. And the wonders of Canaan are ahead of them, but who knows when they will reach the Promised Land? Their problem is the middle. They occupy the middle ground. They have escaped slavery, but they have not yet reached heaven.

So, they complain. They are fed up. They hate the manna, they hate Moses, they hate everything in sight. Hate the wilderness. Hate the rocks. Hate the wind. They are about beside themselves. So, they complain about God and about Moses.

You've heard how that turned out: the LORD sent fiery serpents among them, and the serpents bit the people, so that many of them died. Then the Israelites came to their senses, repented of their complaining, and begged Moses to intercede for them. Moses does so by fashioning a bronze serpent, setting it up on a pole, and instructing the people bitten by the serpents to look to the bronze serpent and live.

They did that, and they lived. But we can only imagine what they were thinking. How could they have known the inner meaning of this looking upon the raised up serpent? But now, in today's Gospel story, we learn the inner meaning of what they were doing. The ancient Israelites did not know it, but they were the first in a long line of faithful people who have looked up to Christ and to him crucified. It is a long line that includes you and me too.

So, that is the first go-round on this ancient story. It is a story about the Israelites in the wilderness, stuck in the middle between Egypt and the Promised Land. Restless, worn out, tempted toward rebellion, but saved by looking where the Lord tells them to look.

THE CHURCH

In our second go-round on this story, let's think of it as a story about God's one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church on earth.

I think my Monday Evening Bible Class likes it when I refer to them in a sermon, and I certainly profit from their great ideas in that class. This time, I want to lift up our recent chapter: Mark 13.

That chapter is called "The Little Apocalypse." It is a chapter in St. Mark about the end time. It speaks of scary things, like the "abomination of desolation" (Mark 13:14), of fleeing to the mountains, of days of affliction, of false Christs who will lead many astray.

And then we find out that these miseries *do not* mean that Christ is near. St. Mark says that the return of Christ *follows* the tribulations he has been describing — the days of affliction, the false Christs, the fleeing to the mountains, and so forth. In fact, the return of Christ is associated with tribulations that go far beyond the miseries St. Mark has described so far. And so the evangelist proceeds to speak of cosmic disasters:

²⁴But in those days, *after* that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, ²⁵And the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. ²⁶And *then* shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory (Mark 13:24-26, KJV)

The more ordinary kinds of miseries — wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, epidemics, false Christs leading people astray — these miseries do not signal the return of Christ. They are a step toward his return, but are not sure signs of his return.

But then our class got to thinking that that has been the situation of Christ's church on earth for two thousand years now. Each generation can look around and think to itself, "Things are pretty awful. I bet Christ is going to come again soon." Especially I lifted up Europe in the fourteenth century, when the Black Death stalked the land. Wikipedia says that that plague is estimated to have killed 30—60% of Europe's population.¹ Think of what that would be like. Everywhere you looked one of your neighbors or one of your family was soon to die. Rich or poor, well educated or unlearned, strong or weak, none of those distinctions mattered much. If you got the Black Death, you probably died.

So, for two thousand years, Christ's church on earth has occupied ancient Israel's middle position. We are somewhere in between the glorious resurrection of Jesus and his Second Coming in beauty and power. But we are not there yet. We are stuck in the middle. And in today's Gospel Lesson, I think that Jesus is asking us to look to him, look to him crucified.

THIRD, YOU AND ME

Now, let's end up by a third look at this story. This time apply the story to your own life. If you are baptized, you lie somewhere in between the great glory of your baptism and the even greater glory of God's kingdom. When you were baptized, you gave yourself to Jesus Christ and he gave himself to you, along with all his benefits, including forgiveness of sins, Communion with him in the Blessed Sacrament, resurrection from the dead, and life everlasting with him in his kingdom. So, that's good! But we are not there yet. None of us. Rather, we are in

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Death

the position of the Israelites in the wilderness: rescue from slavery to sin and the devil lies behind us in our baptism, and heaven lies ahead. But here we are, stuck in the middle. And sometimes, like Israel of old, we are about worn out by it all.

Sometimes a crisis comes along, but then passes on. So it was for me a year-and-a half ago, when I had open heart surgery. I felt fine before the surgery, I feel fine now. But there for a while, things were iffy. Glad to say, it has worked out okay so far.

But this is a small matter compared to the burdens that many of you in our congregation carry and have carried for years. Chronic illnesses have dampened life for some of you — thinks like terrible arthritis or cancer or breathing problems or MS, like my brother has. You are baptized, and that was glorious. You are promised heaven, and that will be even more glorious. But meanwhile, you are betwixt and between, and you might be getting pretty tired here.

Time takes its toll on us, especially if we have been enduring long years of disappointment. Money is too tight for some of you. Years go by and you can never really breathe a sigh of relief, never spend recklessly just for fun, never go on the kind of vacation you would really like.

Or years of a special kind of loneliness are leaving you sad. You have friends, you have colleagues and neighbors. There are people all around. Yet you would have liked to find some special person you could spend your life with. It has not yet happened, and you are getting tired.

Or suppose you have a job that feels overwhelming to you. You are the little boy with your finger in the hole in the dike. It feels as if you are holding the sea back, and you don't know how much longer you can hang in there. You are a police person, for example, in a neighborhood where crime is growing. Or you are a Homeland Security agent in a world where terrorism continues and it is hard to imagine any solution. Or you are a medical researcher battling illnesses that seem to have an infinite ability to shift themselves and take on new identities.

You are baptized and you are meant for heaven. But for now, you are stuck in the middle. What should you do if you are getting worn out by it all?

In today's Gospel Reading, Jesus asks all weary Christians to keep their eye on him. Look at him, lifted up on the pole. Watch him especially as Holy Week approaches. Watch his terror in the Garden of Gethsemane, watch his pain and exhaustion in his nighttime interrogations, watch his agony on the Cross, and listen to his words of love even there: "Father, forgive..." Then try to reckon with the idea that reality is on his side and on his way of life, for he is resurrected. And in looking to him, crucified, try to find new strength for each day.

The apostles knew of our weariness and vulnerability. St. Paul, for example, encourages us with these words:

⁹And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. (Galatians 6:7-9, KJV)

And perhaps the New Testament's most beautiful words of encouragement are to be found in the letter to the Hebrews, in a passage that uses a rare word in the Bible — an American kind of word: “pioneer.” The passage starts off by reminding us of our brothers and sisters in the faith who through the ages have endured weariness like we might know, yet remained faithful:

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. (Hebrews 12:1-3, RSV)

“Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” Looking to the Savior set up on a pole, mocked by many, hanging on a cross. Looking to the One who in spite of it all will prove to be our Savior and the Savior of anyone, anywhere who is willing. I mean Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.