

Karen Hollis | March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9 | Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22 | John 3:14-21

Lent 4 – Living Faith

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Stories from scripture are told and re-told over time. The story of the Exodus is told in 4 of the 5 books of the Torah; each book approaches the story in a different way or gives detail to parts of the story that aren't included in the others. Jesus knew all of these stories; I find it mind blowing that Jesus read the same texts we read. He thinks about these texts and interprets them, applies them to his life and ministry, and like the one we read today, he uses them to help people understand his calling.

The gospel reading this morning begins part way into a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Jewish leader whose heart is stirred by Jesus, but has come to him at night to avoid being seen. In the course of their conversation, Jesus reaches into the book of Numbers, a book Nicodemus also knows, to illustrate his point. We heard the story this morning about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness . . . why does Moses do this and why is it a useful story for Jesus? The Israelites are unhappy in the desert; they are free from slavery, but not free from hardship. Like with anyone living in the wilderness, there are problems to solve around food, water, wildlife, group dynamics, and at God's direction Moses has addressed them. Still, they are wondering if the familiarity of slavery would be better than this and besides, they don't like desert food. But God brought them out of slavery not so they could complain and turn back, rather God is leading them ultimately to a new future and a new life. When the Israelites lose sight of this and whine about life in the desert, the text says God sends serpents among the people and some get bitten. This scene is a bit eyebrow raising, perhaps even alarming; it might move us to ask questions about sin and judgment, and about God's love; these are all excellent questions both for us to ponder on our own and for a different sermon. For now, the story continues. When Moses prays to God on behalf of a repentant people, God tells him to make an image of the serpent and hold it high for those bitten to look upon and be healed. The image of the serpent works like a homeopathic or vaccine, if you will. The image of the serpent is not the serpent but is enough like it that it will give resistance to the thing that is killing them. And what is killing them? The

hardness of their hearts as they turn from God. The serpent is a representation of their brokenness as they shed the life of slavery, and it is the pathway to their healing. Theologian Debie Thomas puts it this way: “the bronze snake . . . forces them to stare the poison down until they see in it [their] grief, [their] anger, [their] judgment, and the unending mercy of a God whose love is vast but tough, deep but demanding. It’s a love that will heal but also expose truth — truth that hurts. It’s a love that will deliver but at the same time invite a change in perspective, a shift in apprehension, a bitter but ultimately salvific ‘looking up.’”

So Jesus uses this image of Moses lifting up the serpent to talk about himself, the Christ. He says: “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up . . . indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3) “The cross dramatically raises up the [systemic] problem of ignorant hatred for all to see, hoping to inoculate us against doing the same thing and projecting our violence onward into history.” The cross puts clearly before us a personification of suffering at the hands of power that is threatened by truth. The image is an invitation to see the brokenness in humanity and how each of us participates in it. It is not supposed to be easy to see, but it is an invitation to reorient ourselves.

Upon looking at the cross, we might see the suffering of the world, our hearts might melt at the sight; on the cross we might see our own suffering and experience God’s compassion; we might see our own judgment of things we don’t fully understand and find our grip on certainty loosening.

The cross doesn’t save us by magic and it doesn’t happen out of nowhere; the saving work of God is deeply contextualized within us and invites us to look at the cross and see what we see . . . and in our seeing, set ourselves on a pathway of healing.

The cross has everything to do with a living faith; what is more life-giving than wrestling with difficult things and coming out the other side? . . . wrestling with theology and stories that don’t fit our image of God or don’t make sense to us; wrestling with ourselves and the parts of us that need healing; wrestling with the cross and other images that won’t let us ignore the collective sin of the world. God won’t save you from struggling with these things, but as you grapple with the cross, God does surround you with a love that is

specifically for you. We really have a great God whose way is life, whose way is liberation and is constantly inviting us to put our faith in God so that God can lead us more fully into life. Amen.