

## **Lent 5 B 2021**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

March 21, 2021

*(using the propers for Lent 4 B)*

John 3:14-21; Numbers 21:4-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Our gospel reading today, which contains a popular Bible verse, is actually a very rich and large tapestry, with a great deal of texture, and a great deal of threads. The brief excerpt that we read did not mention that Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus. Who is a Pharisee. Who has come to visit Jesus under the cover of darkness. In the city of Jerusalem. During Passover. Jesus will return to Jerusalem again for Passover, and we will join him on that return next Sunday, Palm Sunday. The connection between Jesus and Passover is so significant that the majority of Christians around the world refer to Easter as Passover. (The word Easter is an outlier. A pagan relic.) Passover is a big deal to Jews. It's arguably an even bigger deal to Christians.

So here are Jesus and Nicodemus in Jerusalem commemorating Passover, the celebration of how God saved the Jewish people from slavery and death under Pharaoh. God and Moses save Israel! Hip, hip, hooray! They part the Red Sea! Hip, hip, hooray! In the popular Jewish description of all the Jewish holidays: "They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat!" Into this happy occasion, Jesus brings up the unhappy story of the snakes. Because despite the awesome deliverance of the passover, God's chosen people were soon complaining about both God and Moses. "*The people became impatient on the way,*" it says in our first reading. "*The people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.'*" That would be the manna from heaven. Miserable food. Would you call that ingratitude? Would you call it foolishness? Would you call it disloyalty and betrayal? Would you call it looking a gift horse in the mouth? You've got to read it slowly. *There IS no food*, they complain. *AND we detest this miserable food!* Well, which is it? There's no food, or the food is detestable? The person who is reporting this story obviously was a parent who had teenagers at some point.

So God sends poisonous snakes. I guess he thought to himself, "*You don't like the manna and the quail every morning? Things could be worse!*" The resolution of this episode is a post with a bronze serpent, a totem, the Nehushtan, that the Bible says was destroyed by King Hezekiah centuries later. [2 Kings 18:4] God did not remove the snakes. But he provided a remedy. You looked up at a bronze snake, and the poison was neutralized, and you lived.

Jesus brings this up in the context of his Passover visit with Nicodemus. That one of the

consequences of the original Passover was this totem, this Nehushtan, which confronted people with their sin. It confronted people with their ingratitude, their disloyalty, their shortsightedness, their difficulty accepting a gift from God. And Jesus says right here that his crucifixion—his lifting up—is analogous to that bronze serpent, that Nehushtan. *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,”* which suggests that Jesus’ crucifixion will have that same kind of power. The power to heal, the power to give life. But also the power to confront humanity. To call us to account. Jesus uses the word “judgment” in today’s gospel. The lifting up of the Son of Man judges humanity in that it confronts us with the truth about ourselves. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.

I certainly feel what Jesus is talking about most acutely during Holy Week. The Sunday of the Passion, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday have a way of illuminating human nature at its worst. Holy Week does not put Jesus on trial. Nor does Holy Week put the Jewish people on trial. Holy Week puts humanity on trial. And unless you have a heart of stone, it will get to you, personally and individually.

The grit of Holy Week is not entirely in the hill of the cross. The elapsed time of Jesus on the cross was a few hours. It’s the other hours and days that really indict humanity. Normally, I feel most aligned with Peter and the other apostles. Who exhibit levels of courage, sacrifice, and self-control that are worthy of Homer Simpson, the television cartoon character. Jesus predicts Peter’s denial, but Peter says it will never happen. And then it happens three times, in an agonizing display of human cowardice. There is a lot of braggadocio in Peter; in one version of the passion, he cuts off a soldier’s ear. And yet Peter falls asleep in the garden. Perhaps the most common sin in the world is to espouse great ideals, and to fail to live up to them. To have actions that do not live up to our words.

There is also the fickleness of the public crowds. There is what appears to be a supportive crowd around Jesus on Palm Sunday. And a nasty and bloodthirsty crowd around Jesus on Good Friday. How easily we are manipulated by our most base emotions. We can read and hear of Judas Iscariot, and wonder what kind of grievance he harbored that would lead him to do what he did. We can read and hear of Pontius Pilate, the most powerful man in the nation, somehow enabling and facilitating a total breakdown of justice. We can read and hear of the high priests, who calculate that the ends will justify the means. The Son of Man is lifted up. And as Jesus says today, that lifting up shines a light. It holds up a mirror. A mirror that is not very flattering to us, or to our society.

The purpose, Jesus says today, is not condemnation. *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.* But deliverance does not come through self-deception. Salvation does not come from looking away. Life does not come from denial of the truth. *For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.* The light exposes our sin. But the light also shows us our salvation. Therefore, we must let the light shine. These are the things that Jesus tells Nicodemus. During their nighttime visit.

The story is presented to us during Lent as a preparation for our Passover: the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Which begins next Sunday. Jesus will be lifted up, just as Moses lifted up the serpent. And just as everyone who looked upon the serpent would live, so everyone who looks upon the Son of Man will stand in the light and will live. Amen.