

Lent IV (B)
Numbers 21.4-9; Ephesians 2.1-10; John 3.14-21
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
26 March 2006

NOT TO CONDEMN BUT TO SAVE

~Paul H. Friesen~

*I will lift up my eyes unto the hills: Whence cometh my help?*¹

Many of us have heard this Psalm verse before; we might even have been comforted by it in a dangerous moment.

But on reflection, it leaves us with a bit of a puzzle, whatever the translation we read it in. To what or to whom are we lifting up our eyes? Is it the Lord whom we are begging to come over the hills with his armies to defend us from the enemy at hand? Or does the psalmist have hill-top pagan shrines in view. Or, perhaps, are the horses and chariots of the enemy just now coming over the tops of the hills in the distance, causing us to beg for God's mercy, wherever God is, while there is still time for our rescue?

Something very much like this puzzle surrounds our readings for today, the fourth Sunday in Lent. If the puzzle is to be resolved, or perhaps if the contradiction is to be reconciled, it must have something do with looking up and staring the truth in the face, whether it is good news or bad.

The biblical book of *Numbers* is full of stories about the wandering tribes of Israel. Many of these are stories of their complaints against Moses, and against the Lord God. Today's story of complaint is the fifth one in the book.² And it is a very particular kind of complaint, the kind of complaint meant to insult its targets, not the genuine kind of complaint that is really open to an explanation, or to any kind of response. I think we have all made both kinds of complaints and also had both kinds directed at us. I think we all know the difference between the two.

The difference between the two is given away at the beginning of the story: 'the people spoke out *against* God and *against* Moses.' The complaint was not about this or that thing, but an attack on their God and on their leader, those to whom they owed their deliverance from miserable lives of enslavement. But this attack was dressed up as a complaint about 'conditions.'

The complained there was no water and they complained there was no food. And though there really was no food, they complained, the food was in fact

¹ *Psalm 121.1, Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC, 1962), p.497.

² See *Numbers* 11.4-35; 14.2-4; 16.13-14; 20.4-5

‘miserable.’ We’ve heard this kind of thing before. It was a bit of a Monty Python moment, but it was beyond humour.

The Hebrew word for ‘miserable’ is rarely used in the Scriptures, but here it means something like ‘cursed’ food, ‘contemptible’ food, food that isn’t worthy of the name ‘food’. It would seem that the people had lost their taste for *manna*, the bread of heaven, the food that they were, in fact, granted daily.³ It’s obvious they wanted to lash out at those they held responsible for their misery, that they really didn’t want an answer. The God of the exodus was under attack; the whole exodus project was under attack. The story of the Israelites was in danger of a new and very unhappy ending.

What follows troubles the modern mind. But it might be best understood in this way: The people had no desire for a conversation with their Lord, so the Lord spoke not a word in return. The Lord instead sent serpents; poisonous, copper coloured snakes that swarmed among the complainers and lashed out at them. It is a frightening scene, the stuff of nightmares, the stuff of a good Hitchcock film. But to those who had seen God’s many plagues upon the slave-drivers of Egypt, there was a way of understanding God’s ways, a way of repenting of sin, of appealing to the mercy of God.

But how could they understand the remedy? They were told to look, in fact to gaze, to fix their eyes at a crude image of the very same snakes raised on a pole.⁴ And as they gazed, they would be healed. This is where that great medical symbol of hope had its beginning, as strange as it may seem today.

But what did it mean in that scene of agony? What was God saying without words? Perhaps the best hint lies in one of the ancient Jewish paraphrases, or interpretive expansions on the stories of Scripture which are called *targums*.

One of the *targums* reads this way: *‘The divine voice came forth from the earth and its voice was heard on high; “Come see, all you creatures, and come give ear, all you sons of the flesh; the serpent [from Genesis 3 in the Garden of Eden] was cursed from the beginning and I said to it, ‘Dust shall be your food.’ Let the serpent which does not murmur concerning its food come and rule over the people which has murmured concerning their food.’”*⁵

In other words, in looking at an effigy of a serpent lifted up on a pole, the people are compelled to stare their sin in the face. In their complaints they have not, in

³ It’s not entirely clear whether they objected to *manna* or other food God provided in the wilderness. See Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p.404. In either case they are attacking the giver, the Lord, through his gifts to them.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.405-406. Two different commands to ‘look’ are given: one of the two different Hebrew words used is much more common than the other. Together they yield the strong language noted above.

⁵ As found in Rabbi Jacob Milgrom’s *The JPS Commentary: Numbers* (Jerusalem: JPS, 1990), p.174.

fact, been calling for their Lord but for the Serpent from the Garden of Eden, so they shall have to be bitten by his minions and have to look at his effigy to comprehend their sin, which is the rejection of their own Lord. They lifted up their eyes and saw the truth. Generations later, incredibly, they would worship this snake-on-a-pole which had since its first appearance been smuggled into secret, idolatrous worship rites.⁶ Such is the shortness of our human memory. But at this moment they lifted up their eyes and they saw the truth about themselves. And the moment they saw it, their wounds began to heal, as God promised.

When we turn to the *Gospel of John*, we are asked to look up again, to stare the truth in its face. The most famous biblical verse for North Americans, *John* 3.16, is found in a conversation between a rabbi, Nicodemus, and Jesus to whom Nicodemus came with these words: ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher...’⁷ It was a conversation in which biblical stories, and images, and interpretations were the way in which the point was made.

The snake on the pole had not been forgotten. But Nicodemus was not called here to first gaze upon a bronze image of a creature of God sent to judge, but on the living image of God himself, Jesus Christ, sent to save: ‘God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him:’ this is the greatest truth.

And all truths must be seen to be believed. If we don’t want to look at the truth, we shall never see it. If we turn our eyes away from the truth, if we step out of the light, we shall avoid it. Jesus said: ‘People love darkness rather than light...for all who do evil hate the light and do not come into the light.’ Don’t look away, don’t turn away your face, said Jesus to Nicodemus. ‘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.’

In all the liturgies of the Christian church, from the beginning, we are asked to look twice: to look our sins in the face, and to look into the face of the ‘Son of Man lifted up’. This ‘double-take’ happens every time we confess aloud our sins together, and together hear God’s words of forgiveness spoken aloud. On Good Friday these two come together in a special way at the noon liturgy, the hour of the crucifixion, in our meditations. We look at the cross, upon which we all put Jesus. And we look at Jesus, who was ‘lifted up...[not] to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’ In this way, said St. Paul to the church in Ephesus, we will be ‘raised up’ with Christ. We shall live, now and always.

In Latin America, as you may know, the mothers of the ‘disappeared’, the mothers and wives of political protesters who were snatched under cover of

⁶ See *II Kings* 18.4.

⁷ *John* 3.2. All biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

night by wicked governments—these women lift up the names and faces of the martyrs. They have forced, for decades, all who they can to lift up their eyes to see and their ears to hear—to face the truth. Likewise, descendents of those who were ill treated, whose gender or race or peculiarities were despised, have called us to remember them. It is not just about law suits for abuse, or reparations for neighbourhoods ploughed under. Holocaust memorials, and calls for UN resolutions about other genocides, and calls for historical programmes cannot so easily be dismissed. It is hard, but we must look truth in the face, we must see the serpent on the pole.

And we must recall the names and faces of those whom we have harmed, because there is nothing to be gained, in the end, by trying to forget, by switching off the light. And we must look at those who have been lifted up, who we have harmed or have not helped. Sometimes, at least, we must leave switched on those TV specials about the starving and hurt in far off places, and put their pictures on our fridge.

But it is also true of those much closer at hand. Will we look up and see those faces when we are asked? Will we lift up the truth for others to see what they have done so that they might repent?

There is no fear in love, said St. John in his letters. Can we tell the truth not only about the world, but about our parish? Can we tell the truth about what we have done and wanted forgotten, or about what has been done to us and left in the dark? May God grant us the love that loves the truth, the love that does not act in fear or hatred, the love that does not complain with malice like our ancestors, but that desires a response.

Thanks be to God that there is always a ‘second look’ if we would take the first, that the Son of Man on the cross has the last word about the serpent on the pole. Thanks be to God that this morning we can see Christ, the incarnate son of God, that we can taste him in bread and wine, in worship and in word. Thanks be to God that the one we see lifted up came not to condemn us, but to save us, to lift us up to live with him—today, in this worship, on the paths we will take this week, and forever.