

FIRST READING: Numbers 21:4-9

A reading from the Book of Numbers:

From Mount Hor the children of Israel set out on the Red Sea road, to bypass the land of Edom. But with their patience worn out by the journey, the people complained against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!" In punishment the LORD sent among the people saraph serpents, which bit the people so that many of them died. Then the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned in complaining against the LORD and you. Pray the LORD to take the serpents away from us." So Moses prayed for the people, and the LORD said to Moses, "Make a saraph and mount it on a pole, and whoever looks at it after being bitten will live." Moses accordingly made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole, and whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 102:2-3, 16-18, 19-21

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

O LORD, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you. Hide not your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; in the day when I call, answer me speedily.

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

The nations shall revere your name, O LORD, and all the kings of the earth your glory, When the LORD has rebuilt Zion and appeared in his glory; When he has regarded the prayer of the destitute, and not despised their prayer.

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

Let this be written for the generation to come, and let his future creatures praise the LORD: "The LORD looked down from his holy height, from heaven he beheld the earth, To hear the groaning of the prisoners, to release those doomed to die."

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.

GOSPEL: John 8:21-30

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Jesus said to the Pharisees: "I am going away and you will look for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going you cannot come." So the Jews said, "He is not going to kill himself, is he, because he said, 'Where I am going you cannot come'?" He said to them, "You belong to what is below, I belong to what is above. You belong to this world, but I do not belong to this world. That is why I told you that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins." So they said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "What I told you from the beginning. I have much to say about you in condemnation. But the one who sent me is true, and what I heard from him I tell the world." They did not realize that he was speaking to them of the Father. So Jesus said to them, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM, and that I do nothing on my own, but I say only what the Father

taught me. The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what is pleasing to him.” Because he spoke this way, many came to believe in him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 5th Tuesday of Lent

God, as portrayed in parts of the Old Testament, can seem to be dysfunctional. Does the hand of God smite and kill? Does the hand of God heal and forgive? God is always killing and punishing people for some transgression. It seems to make prayer a dangerous movement. Approaching God is a crap-shoot; it can kill or heal the one who prays. How can we view a passage like this? God is love; infinite, eternal and unconditional. Here God seems irrational, sometimes.

For many years, I’ve known people who’ve avoided reading the Old Testament for passages like today’s. I always like to point out that the bible’s narrative is not like a novel that unfolds. It’s not a history book that tells us how it really happened. It is a book, or in reality, many books bound together, that tells a story from the perspective of faith. The writers and readers of it are believers in God and have a sense of how God can be found anywhere, at any time, in any event or person. God can be found in joy, sorrow, fear, delight and pain. The true gift of God is not so much in the events of life but knowing God’s presence during them.

This story reveals how the Hebrew people knew God as they faced all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Even though they longed for better food, ample water and the stability of a home, they were still a people of an unfulfilled promise. They were on a journey to freedom in the Promised Land. God was always near even in their pain. This story reflects their knowledge of God’s continued presence with them in that journey. All things were by the grace of God. This was true for them as it is for us.

We read these ancient stories as has all generations since they had occurred; as events that happened. The bible was not written until after people became settled, established as a people and literate. These were stories that the nomadic Hebrew tribes told around camp fires and passed on by retelling. Over the years, don’t tales get retold with some embellishment? The roots for the words scripture and bible are the words for written and book, respectively. What was once a living tradition became set on paper as if on stone when written in a book. They were words that no longer could change and grow. From our perspective they will always be stories of long ago. The scriptures can provide a means for us to interpret our lives now through the experience of people long ago. This is our living story now.

For many peoples, the snake can be a symbol of new life. They shed their skins as they grow and age. For us, the serpent in the bible is living temptation, cursed by God, crawling on its belly and eating dirt. The thought of a snake being anything else than dangerous is difficult for us. It was like Moses putting an image of Satan and death on a pole. Serpents did, after all, sicken and kill many with their bites. It was also, molded in bronze and mounted on a pole, the means of people’s healing. There is a similar symbol for us as Christians and Catholic.

We honor the images of cross and crucifix in a similar manner. We take their presence for granted atop our churches, above our altars, leading our processions and hanging on the walls

above our beds. The sign of death has become the sign of salvation, the forgiveness of sins and the promise of new life. Paul called the cross an absurdity to Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews. Jesus rose from death and made it, for we who believe, a sign of resurrection and hope. We can take its presence for granted as we wear it around our necks too.

However, for the very early Church, it was too painful to look at. It didn't become a common symbol of Jesus for generations later. The iconography of those early believers was the fish or good shepherd. The cross gained prominence many years later. The symbol of the fish could be used as a silent sign of greeting under persecution. A simple "s" could be traced on the ground with a toe and answered by a complimentary tracing by another to complete a fish's outline and then quickly erased. The Greek for fish is ichtus (ἰχθύς). The word itself had Christological meaning; I for Iesous (Jesus), X for Christos, TH for Theos (God), U for uios (Son) and S for sotor (Savior). The Good Shepherd was one of the names Jesus had given himself. In any event the symbol of death, for both the ancient Hebrews and us, has become the symbol of new life through faith.

Today's gospel has Jesus sharing his mission, which is the cross, to people who do not believe in him, his signs or his teaching. From our perspective, it's easy for us to cast them as villains. They seem to be pretty good at being Jesus' adversaries and giving him a tough time. They simply refuse to believe. The gospel of John most likely was written after the Romans destroyed both the temple and the city of Jerusalem in the year 70 of the Common Era. Soon after that date, those who believed in Jesus were expelled from synagogues. After that, Christianity, which had been part of Judaism, became a separate religion.

Believers in Jesus had hoped, and still do, that all people, especially Jews, would come to believe in him. Since that never happened, the collective pain and frustration of the early Church reflects from these early encounters in John's gospel. The letters of Paul, written before the written gospels, told us that faith is a gift. That is a gift that only God can give. It was hard for the members of the early Church to grasp and live that reality. It may be difficult for us, too, when members of our own families may not have it either. Letting go of our feelings and letting God work in God's own time is hard for us as it was difficult for John to express in his gospel.

Not having received God's gift of faith is not a personal sin and merely reflects our shared human condition. Sin for someone else is never our concern; for when we judge them we commit the sin. We assume God's role. To do that is idolatry. When we offer people to God in prayer, we offer the sequitur as Jesus added, "Not my will, but thine be done!" God is loving, compassionate and merciful in ways we'll never be. Jesus died to destroy sin and death once and for all. God will work in God's own time and way. We have the gift of faith to know and live this. God works by invitation not coercion and so can we.

Jesus accepted his mission and ministry freely. Service of others and God, preaching repentance and the love of God was Jesus' ministry. His mission was to die on the cross. Through his death he redeemed us. Through his resurrection he won for us the promise of new life. The only thing a person needs to experience these gifts is faith in God and in Jesus. The Jewish people in this gospel are already halfway there; they believe in God. Their strong response to Jesus reflects their depth of faith in God; not yet in him.

John's gospel is full of symbols. Jesus used the term I AM. This is the name God gave God's self to Moses in the book of Exodus. All if is can use the term too. You and I exist; you are and I am. God lives in us. For Jesus being God was his first, full nature. He also said that I AM from the beginning as in Genesis. Jesus is the Word of God that God spoke to create the cosmos. This is no coincidence. John wanted us to make the connection too. That his audience then did not is not as important as that we do. We read this knowing Jesus' truth. He also made a good connection with today's reading from Numbers. "When you lift up the son of Man..." It's not on their shoulders and not in his resurrection; yet. It's being lifted up on the cross to die. Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on a pole, death became life.

Sometimes it would be good for God to intervene in life as he did in the days of Moses. Would that God end, today, the scourges of our lives. So many people die by wars, COVID and bad human behavior every day. Yet, we know that God works through each of us. God saves us from sin and gives us new life to do better. God doesn't change our situations. God changes us. We give witness to God's compassion, mercy and love in the way we treat others. When we fail, we can turn to God for forgiveness to try anew.

As God lifted up Jesus, may we rise to new life in him.

James D. Beath

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