

“INSTRUMENTS OF DEATH ... MEANS OF LIFE”

Lent 4 March 22, 2009
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

Introduction:

Our lesson from Numbers 21 contains a fascinating story from the Exodus experience that helps explain the symbol of our medical profession, the serpent on a pole as a symbol of healing.

Likewise, in our Gospel lesson, Jesus referenced this scene from the Old Testament with these words: *“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 both cases, God enabled instruments of death to be used as an means of healing and life. A poisonous snake from the Exodus, a Roman Cross from the life of Jesus, our faith and obedience to God became, by the grace of God, means of life. What was meant for our harm became instruments for salvation. First, let’s look at

The Scene From Numbers.

The Israelites were in the desert and growing impatient with God. In their impatience they began to grumble against God. When their impatience moved to “speaking against God”, God punished them.

Isn’t that so true in life? A lot of our discontent is brought about because of our impatience. We have

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trouble “waiting on the Lord to work all things together for our good” (Romans 8:28). Likewise, parents can tolerate a measure of backtalk from their children, but when it reaches the point where the talk turns disrespectful it must be dealt with.

In punishing the grumbling people, God sent poisonous snakes into the camp. People were being bitten and were dying. In their fear of dying people began to repent of the sin of speaking against God and Moses. They then asked Moses to intercede for them with God and have the snakes taken away.

What followed was another example of God listening to our prayers. God heard Moses' prayer of intercession. He then instructed Moses to make a poisonous snake and set it on a pole. People who were then bitten could look at the bronze serpent and be healed, and live.

This was the first example of God taking an instrument of death – a poisonous snake – and turning it into a means of life. The next instance was spoken of by Jesus Himself. We look

At The Scene From John's Gospel.

In the third chapter of John's Gospel Jesus is visited by Nicodemus, a member of the ruling council and

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a Pharisee. Nicodemus is intrigued by Jesus, is impressed with the miracles he does, the credit He gives to God in Heaven, and is beginning to believe that Jesus just might be more than a modern prophet – maybe even the long-awaited Messiah.

He engages Jesus in a conversation that Jesus quickly turns to deeper spiritual matters, namely about being born again. Nicodemus is admittedly confused by this conversation about being “born again”, and pushes the point with Jesus that one cannot once more enter into his mother’s womb to be born again!

⁵Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus is still confused and says to Jesus: “How can this be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? ¹¹Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and

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bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

No one hearing that conversation on that day understood that Jesus was talking about being lifted up on a Roman Cross of Crucifixion. But, He was talking about a Cross – literally. This would be the second instance where God took an instrument of death and turned it into a means of life. The Cross – what Jesus accomplished there by substituting Himself as the penalty for our sin – turned the Cross from death to life.

Now we, who are bitten by the snake of sin, and are feeling the poison of death already gripping us, can turn to the Cross and look upon the One who died there, believing in Him; offering Him our sin and receiving His forgiveness in return; and move from death to life. Yes, Jesus was talking literally to Nicodemus and He was also

talking to us today in figurative manner.

How Do We Lift Up Jesus?

That's what Jesus said, wasn't it; "so must the son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." How do you and I lift Jesus Up? The question goes to the heart of how we live our daily lives. In the mundaness of each day, how do we lift Jesus up so others might see him and live? I guess it has to do with our integrity. Do we live our faith with integrity so that others might see Christ in us, and maybe through us see the Jesus who is lifted up, and go to Him and receive eternal life?

I was privileged to attend the Koo family party given by Bob and Margaret's children honoring their 60th Wedding Anniversary. Through words Bob spoke, one of his son's spoke, and through conversations with people that evening I heard about a couple who lived their lives with Christian integrity. They are not perfect people. None of us are, and that is not the point. It is about living our lives in a way that lifts Jesus up; that is not ashamed of Him; that doesn't try to hide Him, or minimize Him, or apologize for Him. Instead, it is about lifting Him up. As we lift Jesus up, He works through us to draw other

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people to Himself. Honestly, Jesus does the heavy lifting, but He wants our shoulder next to His, giving it what we are capable of giving.

St. Paul wrote in

The Epistle To The Ephesians

¹In the past you were spiritually dead because of your sins and the things you did against God. ²Yes, in the past you lived the way the world lives, following the ruler of the evil powers that are above the earth. That same spirit is now working in those who refuse to obey God. ³In the past all of us lived like them, trying to please our sinful selves and doing all the things our bodies and minds wanted. We should have suffered God's anger because of the way we were. We were the same as all other people.

⁴But God's mercy is great and he loved us very much. ⁵Though we were spiritually dead because of the things we did against God, he gave us new life with Christ. You have been saved by God's grace".

It was God's grace at work in the wilderness that saved the Israelites from the snakes, and it is God's grace at work in our modern lives that saves us from our current grumblings against God. In these tough economic times some people are turning against God. They are shaking

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their fists and cursing God for letting such devastation overtake them. Financially, spiritually, they are dying.

Others are turning to God. They are looking at the Cross and the One who hung there. The One who understands hardship, suffering, rejection, the loss of all things, and still loves. Loves who? God loves them and you. These times are instruments of death for some, but by God's grace will be means of life for those who look to Jesus for help.

But, a word of warning here: God doesn't save us just to get us out of the pressure cooker. It cost Jesus too much for God's grace ever to be offered or received cheaply. Christ died on purpose, with a purpose, and God saves us for a purpose.

Paul goes to say in that letter to the Ephesians: *⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—⁹not because of works, lest any one should boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

God expects a return on His investment of Christ's blood. The return is that we would lift Jesus up in

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our lives so others can see Him, come to Him, give Him their sin, and receive eternal life from Him.

Who do you know that you could invite to come to church with you, especially this close to Easter? Easter is one of two Christian holidays that people are open to receiving an invitation to attend church. I think we have something good going on here. I want to share it with whosoever. “For God so loved the world that that He gave His only begotten Son; that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

You know, we might as well fill this place up. It will only cost us pennies more. We are already absorbing the major expenses now. Doubling in size will only cost us more bulletins, more communion bread and wine, more brownies and drinks at the fellowship time, and a couple of bucks more to heat and cool the building. Remember, Jesus has already done the heavy lifting. Our cost is minimal.

Lifting Jesus up is one thing we can all pick up this Lent. Amen? Amen. God bless us.