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| **The Lessons Appointed for Use on the** | http://www.lectionarypage.net/Art/Newshield.gif |
| Fourth Sunday in Lent |
| Year B RCL |

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

**The Collect**

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.*Amen.*

**Old Testament**

**Numbers 21:4-9**

From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but 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.” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

**The Response**

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

***Confitemini Domino***

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, \*  
and his mercy endures for ever.

2 Let all those whom the Lord has redeemed proclaim \*  
that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.

3 He gathered them out of the lands; \*  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.

17 Some were fools and took to rebellious ways; \*  
they were afflicted because of their sins.

18 They abhorred all manner of food \*  
and drew near to death's door.

19 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, \*  
and he delivered them from their distress.

20 He sent forth his word and healed them \*  
and saved them from the grave.

21 Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy \*  
and the wonders he does for his children.

22 Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving \*  
and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.

**The Epistle**

**Ephesians 2:1-10**

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

**The Gospel**

**John 3:14-21**

Jesus said, “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.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

The lines from the Gospel of John seem comforting. We all know them by heart, or close to it…someone startst it and we can finish it….“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

And in today’s Gospel, we read the line before it “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.” Which as you now know comes from a weird story from Numbers, and yes it is weird, that God gets angry and sends serpents among the people to bite them. But why does God get angry. We know that God is slow to anger, but God’s holds those ten utterances (from last week’s sermon) pretty dear, —- particularly the first one……do not speak against God. And yet, God provides a way out of the certain death which would result from getting bit by a poisonous snake. Looking at the serpent that Moses holds high on a stick offers redemption and healing, strange as that is John then makes the connection for us, that through one man dying and being lifted high on the cross we also may live. One held high offers healing and redemption. It doesn’t matter that it was a snake, you look where God tells you to look to receive life. You are turning to God, reorienting your life towards God. Through death there is life. Turning towards God offers reconciliation, redemption, healing…

There are two aspects to this premise of re-ordering your life. The first part is to know what you are turning away from to turn to God and Jesus and the second is what does it involve to turn towards God. Knowing that the desire for each comes by way of an invitation from God.

“For God so loved the world” sounds a bit like God on a Valentine Card, but first remember that “so” here is not like “so much” but “so” like “in the manner”.. Becasue God loved the world in a particular way, he gave his Son. Second I need to point out the obvious that we, humanity, we are messy. So, I am totally happy to run with “God so loved the world,” which then means that God loves us in our sinful state, through our brokennes, which does not mean God wants us to stay there. And the way out of that sinful state is that two fold thing:

so, first… turn away from what separates you from God. For Jesus to have power to offer reconciliation and healing to the world, there is some hard reckoning to know in our bones what it is that we are turning away from. There has to be an awareness of what sin actuaally is. And since we don’t talk much about sin, it becomes harder to put your finger on it. Dinner conversation rarely goes, “how was your day? where did you sin? “ No doubt, you have heard me or countless others mention that sin is anything that separates you from a right relationship with God. That is true, and would of course include anything that devalues your neighbor, or you can read neighbor as any other person. Your neighbor could be even your family, your close family or your extended family. Sin can ve viewed very narrowly or very broadly. Narrowly, what do I personally do that is sinful? And broadly, how do I contribute to institutional sin? What I mean by institutional sin, for example, are tax systems that favor the rich. Instituional racism, such that it is more difficult for a person to get a bank loan regardless of income, or get a job based on what they look like or what their name is.

Remember too any action you take are in response to the love of God (see Ephesians) So to turn away from our sin, we could think of this as turning towards God, Gods dream for the world, joining the tide or stream of God’s flourishing life.

The other part of this two fold piece is to believe in God, to believe in Jesus. Now this is actually much trickier than it first appears. There are some who would take this to be a way to rest if you know you believe in Jesus, but I for one, just don’t see it that way. Believing feels like a mental assent but it isn’t. As much as it is important when we say the words of the Nicene creed which will follow this sermon and give space for the doctrine that the 4th century fathers worked to get right, as much as that it is true it only goes so far.

The Greek word to believe— πιστεύων is an action verb. It is always easier to do actions that your heart or mind is behind, but that is actually less important. What is crystal clear is that Jesus cares if you are meaning what you say and saying what you rmean. You and I cannot know what anyone else’s faith walk is, and since it is a not a decision as such but a participation in the in-breaking of the kingdom, an enactment of belief, an obeying,,,, then all we can do is look at our life and start putting our faith in motion. Clearly an unexmained life is not worth much becasue it effectively keeps you away from God and in sin. That is not where God wants you to be. Believing is not a mental assent, believing is obeying.

Believing is doing the things which Christ expects us to do. Enacting the Beatitudes. What you have do for the least of these, you have done for me. It is also your actions towards the least that matter. Coming up to Maundy Thursday, it is the commandment to love one another, which is to serve one another, to give and give. Not believing translates to not doing. And more importantly not doing is then not believing. It is always easier to do actions that your heart or mind is behind, but that is actually less important. In the words of a 1980s NIke commercial, Just Do It.