

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2024

Faith, Okemos

Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-19, John 3:14-21

What Wondrous Love Is This?!

“This is the day, this is the day that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made, we will rejoice, we will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it...”

For me singing this simple song is sometimes a helpful antidote in the days when my mind and heart seems dominated by harsh, sorrowful, cynical, judgmental, or angry thoughts and emotions. Sometimes my thoughts and feelings about myself or about my family, or about our governmental leaders, or about pretty much everybody else are more negative than positive. Sometimes that has included my thoughts and feelings about God. I can be pretty good at grumbling.

The story of the Israelites in the wilderness is one of four ancient stories of God’s children grumbling, murmuring, complaining about how tough they had it on their long journey to the promised land. Though God had provided water to quench their thirst, manna and quail to satisfy their hunger, a cloud to guide them during the day and a fire to guide them during the night, they would have much preferred the equivalent of a hamburger at Culver’s or an Olive Garden salad, and a Hampton Inn for nightly lodging. They were good at whining against both God and Moses. [“We detest this miserable food.”]

Their situation only worsened when at one point in their journey they were afflicted, many of them fatally, by poisonous serpents.

Sometimes it takes something deeply frightening, something life-threatening to make us aware of our negativity, our griping, our “bitching” if you will. Here, I think, humbling and desperately “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 here, as always, when we recognize our failure to trust that God has never forsaken us, has never misled us...and never will, even in the worst of circumstances, the wondrous love of God about which get to sing after this sermon is graciously, wonderfully, and powerfully given to us.

And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it in on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at 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.

And in John's gospel, Jesus says, "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."

It was in wondrous love that God gave his wilderness children a visible sign that his love, his grace, was greater than their rebellion, greater than their murmuring, their complaining, their failure to trust him. The wondrous mystery of God's love is that even and maybe especially those things we most fear, like being bitten by a poisonous snake, or fear that we might die of thirst or hunger, or die at the hands of those who hate us, all are transformed by God to become signs of healing and of new life.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!

Now Jesus says to us (in the third person), "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." Here is the wondrous love of God: Jesus takes into himself all the poison, all the vicious hatred, all the cunning lies, all the grumbling, all the fears of the world; and is lifted up on the cross. There the Son of Man and Son of God dies for us.

What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul, to bear the dreadful curse for my soul?

And through his dreadful death on the cross, the antidote for the poison of the world, the poison in our own hearts and souls is given to us.

When you and I think about the cross, maybe either before and/or after we receive Holy Communion, when we take into ourselves Jesus' body and blood, we make the sign of the cross..., may we remember and know that we have eternal life.

The serpents may still abound, the lies we hear, and yes, the lies we tell about ourselves, the lies that we and all the peoples and creatures of this world are not radically loved, all these lies are neutralized by Jesus' death on the cross. We and all people are radically loved. We know this by receiving and embracing the God's gift of faith day after day: everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

The writer to the letter to the Ephesians, probably a protege of St. Paul, wrote these beautiful words:

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 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.

What to me is so beautiful about these words is two-fold: 1) the very capacity to believe what Jesus did for us on the cross is a [daily] gift from God, not our own making; and 2) the outcome of this God-given faith each day is a life of good works which God has already set-up for us to do! [To me this is eternal life, a life filled with love, filled with good works created and enabled by God to be our way of life.]

Made newly alive every day, we do what comes naturally out of that newness. After worship last Sunday many of gathered around tables, and we talked about the various ways God drew us to this congregation. We talked about how over and over again we get to be our new selves in giving and receiving love for each other and for the world around us. We shared, albeit briefly, about how each of us in our own unique way is doing good work as we grow and mature in grace.

Our God-given work in the months of transition still ahead is actually pretty simple: it is to prayerfully and thoughtfully discern before we call our next pastoral leader, the good works which God has already prepared beforehand to be our future way of life together.

Looking at Jesus lifted up on the cross, we daily confess our sins, our alienation from God and from each other, whether family or friend, stranger or foe. We confess our grumbling. We hear anew each day, in our souls, through that death we are forgiven. We get to live a forgiven, grateful, joyful life of good works prearranged by God.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!

[Let's sing it together.]

Amen.
JDS