

**Lent 4 B, 2024** *St. Aidan's, the Rev Julie H. Smith*  
**Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21**

*Danger frequently paves the way to new life.*

..... This morning, we hear the first of three passion predictions in John's gospel as Jesus continues his conversation and explanations to Nicodemus. It sets the tone for this midway point of Lent as we move closer to the Passion, and resurrection of Jesus.

The gospel reading establishes the theology of the pascal mystery– the meaning of suffering, pain, healing, transformation and redemption, God's saving love.

.....pretty heavy stuff on what we Episcopalians have come to know in our tradition as Rose Sunday, Refreshment Sunday, *Laetare Sunday* in Latin. In the Western liturgical calendar this Sunday has been a day of celebration, within the austere period of Lent. A joyful pause in a somber season.

This Sunday gets its name from the first few words of the traditional Latin entrance for the Mass of the day. Taken from Isaiah (66:10-13)

<sup>10</sup>*"Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. <sup>11</sup>For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance." <sup>12</sup>For this is what the LORD says: "I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. <sup>13</sup>As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."*

There isn't a more joyful tone at this halfway point in the Lenten season. Traditionally, the Apostles Creed is "handed over" to the catechumens, the last step for those preparing for Baptism in the church at the Great Easter Vigil. Laetare Sunday is also called *Mothering Sunday*, named because a person would visit his/her "mother church," on this day, another name for the church he/she grew up in. This day also became connected with visiting one's biological mother on Laetare Sunday.

This midway point during Lent when we take a reprieve from all the penitential quality of our worship, rose colored vestments...

instead of purple are often used, and some have the tradition of having a special little cake... called a "*simnel*" cake. Now more often associated with Easter but originated with the fourth Sunday in Lent.

Even though we might look-up from our prayer posture for a little breath of fresh air on this fourth Sunday of Lent ....we also know that the cross is coming . . .

The cross comes before resurrection.

Sometimes suffering is the only path to redemption, and often the road to healing and light runs straight through darkness and pain.

It may not be a comforting message, but it is a truthful one.

. . . at a time in my ministry, I had a mentor who used to say to me in my struggles of leadership . . . when the vicar of a small church; "perhaps you have not suffered enough." "But I don't want to suffer anymore; I found myself saying sometimes...."

Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Day after day they have been trudging around in the desert, with God providing manna to eat, and with Moses at the helm.

They are tired and frustrated and not at all sure where they are going or even if Moses knows what he is doing, they are certain they are about to die,

dissension is growing in their ranks.....

...they are tired of this suffering.

The "Let's go back to Egypt" committee is forming and the murmuring and complaints continue, they whine..... "Slavery in Egypt was tough, but it was better than this freewheeling way of life we have now... with freedom there are too many choices..." with Pharaoh .... not so much.

I've heard it said by other clergy that every church has a "*Let's go back to Egypt*" committee, informally, a group of people opposed to any sort of change and always want to go back to the way things used to be...

Eventually God has enough of their whining and sends a pack of poisonous serpents (snakes) into their midst. (Numbs 21:4-9)

Many of them die before the "*Let's go back to Egypt*" committee can convince Moses to change God's mind.

We have heard this story of a serpent getting the best of God's people before, back in the Garden of Eden. ...No wonder the Israelites were scared.

But things change when Moses makes a bronze snake and puts it on a pole . . . those that died were given new life and every time someone was bitten all he or she had to do was to look to the serpent and be healed.

It is the symbol adopted by the American Medical Association taking the image of the ancient Greek god of healing, a snake wrapped around a staff.

And as anyone who has ever had serious surgery or intensive treatment for a serious illness such as cancer knows that there can be a lot of pain and suffering before one can be fully healed.

Danger frequently paves the way to new life. An image of ugliness and death can be the means of wholeness. These scriptures – echo the larger story of our salvation.

Ephesians give us hope "*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*"

Jesus' violent death on the cross is the moment of God's redemption and the reconciliation between God and creation/humanity.

Yet still whether it is Moses raising up a dead serpent or Jesus bleeding on the cross, it is an odd way for God to show God's love and mercy to his people, granting healing through pain and lifting up an ugly image of death to bring about new life.

On the other hand, snakes in the ancient world were also a symbol of both, death and danger, fertility, life and healing. Perhaps that background will help us a little...

This passage in John picks up when Jesus continues his conversation with Nicodemus explaining what it means to be born from above and then further extends his teaching to the others gathered, he says; *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”*

Seen through our Christian eyes the image of death lifted high on a pole is not that of a serpent, but that of God in Christ lifted high on the cross.

When Jesus says, *“God so loved the world,”* Jesus is asking us to see the God who created the world out of love as the same God who is lifted high on the cross in redeeming love.

Sometimes it's hard to know if that love is like dying on the dark night of Good Friday or the glory of Easter's morning light.

The Lent journey always takes us through to Good Friday; we cannot get to Easter without it.

All of us eventually will bear the sadness of the cross; we all know the pain and love that mingle together in our own stories, as well as they do in the heart of God.

During this season of Lent, even on Laetare Sunday when we rejoice that Lent is almost over; we recognize our need for repentance and forgiveness, as we look up to the abundance of God's love for us through the gift of Christ Jesus.

Like the Hebrews in the desert, we still complain and stray from the God . . . . and may even get caught up in the *“Let's go back to Egypt”* committee.

The serpent reminds us not only of another time when people were needy and perishing, but a time when they were saved simply by looking up. Jesus in the same way is, as an offering by a God who “so loved the world.”

John 3:16 is a verse often used today as a cosmic rule to mark out who is truly a believer, a bumper sticker of Christianity.

John’s gospel, in its unique form, emphasizes the mystery of a God who has always been with us and who chooses to come closer to us. A God who is made human makes room for us to feel a little less alone in the world. God is our companion in this life and in the next.

It is up to us to hold up Jesus so that those who need healing can find it regardless of where they are in their journey. . . . whether in pain, broken or simply searching for a deeper meaning in their lives.

This is what we are called to as Christians, to spread hope to those who need it.

Because we know “the immeasurable riches of God’s grace” (Eph. 2:7). And as one of our Taizé chants says: “*Wait for the Lord, his day is near, wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart. . .*”

We wait for the Lord whose day is near, we wait for the resurrection to remind us, there is no end to God’s love.

( sing...)

“*Wait for the Lord, his day is near,  
wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart. . .*”

In the name of the One who died for us.

*Amen.*