

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, March 15, 2015

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they 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.

John 3:14-21

And 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.

Let us pray...Amen.

Over one hundred years ago, the infant mortality rate in the United States was nearly 20%. The mortality rate for children up the age of 5 was also close to 20%. This, according the US Center for Disease Control. One child in 5 died from any number of illnesses and diseases: pertussis, polio, rubella to name just a few...

In 1790, a scientist named Edward Jenner discovered something amazing: young women who milked cows, often contracted infections on their hands from cows who had cow pox. Now, that in and of itself isn't that amazing. What is amazing is that those young women who got infections on their hands from the cows, *didn't get smallpox*.

Edward Jenner figured out that their exposure to cowpox somehow prevented them from contracting smallpox, a disease that killed one in three, and left survivors horribly scarred.

From this brilliant observation, medicine has developed a science entirely devoted to vaccinations. From this humble beginning we have a whole branch of science devoted to immunology, the study of the human immune system.

What Edward Jenner discovered, was that the human body is constructed in such a way that when it is exposed to very small and weakened amounts of a disease, it can develop an immunity to that disease. This has essentially eliminated Polio, Whooping Cough, Measles, Rubella, and a whole host of other nasty diseases from our daily lives.

But only if a child gets a vaccination. For a while, almost every child got their vaccinations. Doctors scheduled them, and parents dutifully brought their children, even if it meant a few tears...the result was what is known as "herd immunity", where a disease can't get a hold of population because almost everybody has immunity. The few who did not receive the vaccine can't get the disease because it can't live in those who did.

But over the last few decades, more and more parents are skipping the series of vaccinations. Fears over a reported link between vaccines and autism, a deeply held belief that animals should not be used in the production of vaccines, and an educational system that simply didn't want to argue with parents about immunizations has led to a robust resurgence of Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Whooping Cough, and even Polio.

Scientists in the field fear that the "herd immunity" developed over that last hundred years, the immunity that has brought infant mortality down to a fraction of what it was, will no longer protect the greater community.

Recently, a private school in California kept 13 unvaccinated students out of school for up to 6 weeks, the incubation period of measles, for their own protection, and for the good of the school. They are at the greatest risk for infection, because they don't have an immunity to some very serious diseases.

What used to be a no-brainer, immunizing our children against horrible childhood diseases has now become a debatable issue for parents. And the health of their children, the health our children, the health of our entire culture is at risk.

For now, the only way to protect a body from certain diseases is to inoculate that body with a small amount of the weakened disease, causing the body to produce anti-bodies for that disease, and rendering a person immune.

And now that I've spent almost half my time talking about medical science, let's see if this can relate to our Hebrew scripture and our Gospel Lesson!

The people of Israel were in the wilderness, complaining bitterly about their circumstances. As a consequence of their complaints, God sent poisonous snakes among them, and they were bitten. Many died. They implored Moses to go and speak with God, so that God would know that they had sinned, that they were sorry, and that they wanted God to take away the snakes.

And when Moses did that, God said: "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

Simply gazing upon a bronze snake, a symbol of the thing that vexes them, lifted up on a pole, would prevent a person from dying.

And, in a similar way, gazing upon Jesus lifted up on the cross will prevent us from the disease of sin. Like a vaccine. A small reminder of our sin, of our role in crucifying Jesus, and we are inoculated against the greater disease.

And Lent is the time we set aside to survey the wondrous cross. To receive our vaccination so to speak. Oh, we can survey the wondrous cross anytime, anywhere, but Lent is the church's designated appointment for our vaccinations!

But it hurts. If we really gaze upon the Christ, or on an empty cross, and if we really catch a glimpse of our sin, even just a diluted amount, it hurts. One of the best definitions of sin I've ever heard is that sin is whatever puts distance between us and God. Whatever puts distance between us and God, that's sin. No specifics, no finger pointing, but a reminder that Jesus was on that cross for our sins, for the very things that put distance between ourselves and our God.

The list is endless, because we humans are endlessly inventive with the ways we can put distance between ourselves and God!

So, just like children who have not been vaccinated, who are at risk for contracting horrible diseases, we are at risk for putting more distance between ourselves and God if we never survey the cross.

And, if enough children don't get their vaccinations, they put the whole community at risk, the 'herd immunity' is in jeopardy. If enough of us avoid gazing upon the cross, if enough of us don't face our sins, it can have a negative effect upon the world, not just ourselves.

While schools can put enormous pressure on parents to get their children vaccinated, there is no such pressure for God's faithful children. If we gaze upon Christ on the cross, or even upon the empty cross, as a symbol of our sin, we gain a modest amount of protection. But fewer and fewer of our sisters and brothers are choosing to do so. The very health of the Christian community is at risk.

I'd like to invite each of us to try and find some time to gaze upon the cross for a few moments this week. To survey the wondrous cross, to connect with the iconic symbol of Christianity in a way that causes us to reflect on our own sins, the things that put distance between ourselves and our God.

A cross with Jesus still on it, known in religious terms as a crucifix, is a cross without a resurrection, or a cross waiting for the resurrection. An empty cross signifies Christ's triumph over sin and death. Either type of cross works as a reminder of our own contributions to Jesus' crucifixion. But the empty cross strikes me as more hopeful, more reassuring, and, at the very least, less gory...

Contemplating the cross, whether a piece of jewelry, our cross behind the altar, a cross in a picture, or one you can hold in your hand is a faithful act. Our willingness to gaze upon a symbol that can represent our own sin is a faithful act. Seeing the empty cross as a reminder that we are forgiven, and believing it, is a faithful act.

Interestingly, the cross represents both our role in Christ's crucifixion and our forgiveness as a result of his resurrection. And it can mean so much more, for each of us, depending on our relationship with God.

I brought a cross with me this morning, one that dates back to 1978, my junior year of high school. My church had renovated an old Sunday School Classroom and declared it the Youth Group Room. My brother and I decided it should have a cross in it, and we used my father's wood working tools to make it. On the day the room was dedicated

and blessed, we placed the cross on the wall with little fanfare. And there it stayed for more than 30 years. So how is it that I have it now?

Well, the church I grew up in has experienced the same kind of decline in attendance and membership that most churches are experiencing. And a few years ago, it was decided that the Youth Group Room was no longer necessary, it wasn't being used, it was wasted space. The church decided to repurpose the room, and 30 years of decorations and symbols were collected and distributed to those who had given them.

I suppose it was naïve of my 10th grade self to think that a homemade cross would hang for as long as there was a wall to hang upon, but part of me is a little sad that my home church didn't have a place for this cross. Now, it's in my office, along with other crosses that have come my way, and it serves as a reminder that things never stay the same. Changes come, and mostly we're not happy about it. Yet another way we put distance between ourselves and our God, since God made the world in a constant state of change!

Please take some time to look at a cross. Reflect on its many meanings unique to you: how did you get it, what does it remind you of, can you connect any of the ways you put distance between yourself and God to this cross? Does it make you feel sad? Hopeful? Reassured? Disturbed? Try not to judge your feelings, just note them. Let them echo around inside for a while.

In spite of its obvious link to Christ's betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, in spite of its representation of our own sin, the cross is the ultimate reminder of the forgiveness of those very sins. A reminder of Jesus, and his triumph over death and sin.

The cross is a powerful gift, and I encourage each of us to receive that gift by reflecting upon all its many meanings. Just a few moments, alone, or in the midst of people, just a few focused minutes on our role in the Christ's crucifixion, and on the gift of his resurrection. A vaccination against the things that separate us from our God. Protection against the sin that puts distance between us and God. Amen.