

Message for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, 2018 *Based on: Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3: 14-21*

Have you ever found yourself in a bad time in our life, and you prayed to God for things to get better, and it seemed your prayer was going unanswered?

Perhaps a relationship with someone you love is broken: a spouse, a sibling, a child or friend, and the heartache won't go away.

Or maybe your finances were in a bad state, or you were out of work.

Or maybe your boss was making your life miserable and you couldn't afford to quit work so had to put up with it– or maybe you were out of work for some time.

Perhaps a family member –or maybe even you yourself was suffering long term or chronic illness that just keeps you down and each day is a fight just to get going.

Everyday life can be a challenge, and there are times when each day is exhausting. It can feel like you're living under a perpetual cloud.

Remember Joe Bltsfk from the L'il Abner Cartoon strip or Eyore? Ever been there?

I think at some point in our lives, we've all been in a place where we didn't want to be. And God didn't seem to be there ... and maybe, just maybe you start to question your faith. It's an uncomfortable place to be.... like being in a dark tunnel with no apparent light at the end of it.

Now, imagine if that went on for FOUR decades, and you were traveling with a large group of people, people of all ages, from babies to elderly folk, and you're crossing a desert, living in a tent, never quite sure if you have enough food, or water each day – well there's some food, enough to keep you just alive. So, you start to question the people who are supposed to be leading you across this God-forsaken desert, can life honestly get any worse? And you feel like God really has forsaken you, and well, you've just had enough of it! So, you rile out against your leader Moses and also against the Lord! And this, is the story of the Exodus in a nutshell.

Our reading from the book of Numbers is the last story of what are sometimes called the murmuring or complaining stories from the journey of the Israelites to the land promised them by the Lord God Almighty, the God of their ancestors, the God who chose Moses to lead them out of slavery. Multiple times in the journey the people become fed up, and cried out against Moses.

Can't you just hear the conversations? Why did God bring us to this desert anyway, at least when we were slaves we had good food, and water. Yeah sure, God gave us manna, and it's ok, it fills us, but after 40 years of it... And then we got all those quails when we had gone so long with out meat, -- don't get me wrong, it was really great, but you know, how long can you really eat quail for? Remember when we were dying of thirst and how the water came from the rock when Moses struck it, now that was amazing. But then God called Moses up the mountain, and he was gone so long, we thought he was dead and that God had abandoned us then for sure. So that when we made that golden calf to pray to; even Aaron said it was fine! On retrospect, that was a really bad idea, we really messed up that time; 3,000 of us died by the sword of the Levites for that, and we had a plague too. And we've had to fight our way across this desert, warring with people as we come across them, and yes we're winning the battles, but so many of our people get killed too. This journey just gets longer and longer, 40 years of this, enough is enough. It's been really tough. Will we ever see this so-called Promised Land?

The people, it seems, are at their breaking point and again they cry out against Moses and God: 'Why have you brought us out here just to die?' They have lost their faith and spoken out against their God, and as the story of the Exodus goes, whenever the people fell away, whenever they chose to go against the laws and ways of their promises, their covenant with God, a major calamity befalls them. They stopped believing and trusting in God, and went their own way. 43 And this time there are venomous snakes whose burning, fiery bites kill. So once again the people cry out to Moses and God, cry for forgiveness and once again God forgives them. God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole and when the people who have been bitten look up at the serpent of bronze, they would be healed. "The serpent was a mark of God's anger and God's mercy. God's people might be saved by the God of life, if only they would look upon the image of that which would have brought about their death."¹ That which caused death, when raised upon a wooden pole, and gazed upon, reflected upon, brought healing and life.

And this, of course, is the story that our Gospel reading from the book of John is referring to: "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." Wow, that's a jam packed theological statement, and includes a play on words: classic in style for John's gospel. So, what is this verse telling us?

Now, the verb in both Greek and Hebrew for 'lifted up' also means exalted. To exalt means to elevate by praise or in estimation : to GLORIFY².

The author of the book of John is telling us that in the act of being lifted up, of being crucified, Jesus is also exalted, Jesus is glorified in his crucifixion. For church-going Christians, these are words that we have heard for years, we don't question this. But for the people of Jesus' time, that would be a hard concept to understand, it wouldn't make sense. Crucifixion was the Roman death penalty for political criminals. How could Jesus' death as a political insurrectionist proclaim his glorification?

"To see the Son of Man lifted up calls for "belief" for the sake of eternal life, not simply a restoration of earthly life. God once saved the people by calling upon them to gaze on the serpent. Now, God would save the people by having them gaze in belief upon the Son, lifted up."³

And how can this be, why should this be? It's still a difficult concept to understand. I've had people tell me they cannot believe in a God that would cause his son to be born so as to die a vicious gruesome death. To understand the cross and resurrection is an act of faith, because at face value, it doesn't make sense.

Paul, in his first letter to the members of the Corinthian church acknowledged this: ¹⁸For the message about Christ's death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God's power. ²¹For God in his wisdom made it impossible for people to know him by means of their own wisdom. Instead, by means of the so-called "foolish" message we preach, God decided to save those who believe. ²²...this message is Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and what seems to be God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' (1Cor 1. GNT)

That which caused death, in being lifted up, exalted by God, is what brings eternal life.

¹ Sarah Henrich, Commentary on John 3:14-21 from http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=263. Accessed Mar. 1, 18

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exalt> accessed Mar. 5.18

³ Henrich

Renowned New Testament scholar and professor Gail R. O'Day describes it this way. "Jesus' offer of his life through being lifted up on the cross makes 'eternal life' possible for those who believe. ... 'Eternal' does not mean mere endless duration of human existence but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God."⁴ Jesus death meant resurrection. In death is new life, in Christ is new life.

Why would God in Christ actually even want to go to the cross? It really doesn't make sense either!

Why? Well, because God so loved the world. Amen

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⁴ Gail R. O'Day; *New Interpreters Bible Commentary Vol IX*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998