

Lifted Up

In the name of him upon whom the Lord laid the iniquity of us all, dear friends in Christ: In this evening's readings we are nearing the very end of both of the Lenten journey we began six weeks ago and of the Israelite's 40 years of wandering in the desert. Thirty-eight years have been passed over in almost complete biblical silence. During that time a generation passed away: the faithless generation that was given the opportunity to take possession of the Promised Land, but refused because they didn't trust the Lord to give it to them. Moses' brother Aaron, the high priest, is also recently dead and buried. Only three persons remain who were twenty years or older when Israel passed through the Red Sea. They are Moses and the two faithful spies, Joshua and Caleb.

It would be nice to report that the current generation is somehow more faithful to the Lord than the preceding one that now lies buried in shallow graves scattered throughout the desert; but sadly, as we heard, that is not the case. They are just as capable of complaining and rebelling against the Lord as their forbears.

What sparked their protest and sent them into what was essentially a nationwide temper tantrum was an inconvenient delay. Traveling north from the Negev and intending to skirt up the east side of the Dead Sea, the Israelites sent a message to the leaders of Edom requesting permission to pass through their land. Permission was denied. The Edomites didn't want some two million hungry and thirsty foreigners tramping through the land the Lord God gave to their forefather Esau and to them. Israel had promised not to touch the Edomites' fruit and crops and even their water; but the Edomites had ample reason not to trust them. There's a back story here. They doubtlessly remembered how Jacob, the forefather of Israel, had connived against his twin brother Esau, taking from him both his birthright and blessing. Besides, even with the best of intentions, how could the leaders of Israel keep two million people who have been subsisting on Manna for 40 years and most of whom have only heard stories of this thing called "fresh fruit" from sampling their neighbor's oranges, pomegranates, figs, and grapes? Not likely to happen.

So, Israel had to go around Edom. That meant taking a mountain pass up and over into the particularly harsh and desolate wasteland that lies east of Edom *and* adding a week or two to the journey. As we heard, it was more than their patience could bear. They begin to sing again to Moses that familiar refrain "Why have you brought us out here to die?" It could be their national anthem. But to it they add some new self-contradictory verses: "There's nothing to eat. There's nothing to drink. And we loathe this worthless food!" Wait. You just said you had nothing to eat. But you do have food; plenty of it. Now you're complaining that you don't like it. They mean the Manna of course, the food God has provided daily that's kept them alive for 40 years. And over that period he has a pretty good track record of giving them water when they need it. I mean, not one of them has yet died of thirst. Their complaint is completely unjustified. No matter. Because they are disappointed and inconvenienced they stubbornly refuse to see how the Lord always has and will continue to take of them.

In response to their bitter whining complaint, the Lord uses the tactic deployed by human parents from the beginning of time: You want to cry? Fine, I'll give you something to cry about. It's snakes, what are described as "fiery serpents". They are called "fiery" for two reasons. There's a species of snake in that region that has a distinctive pattern of red scales that

suggests flames of fire. Also their deadly venomous bite produces an extremely painful burning sensation. Hence “fiery serpents”: these are the agents of the Lord’s discipline on his people.

And that might strike us as odd at first. Recall that Satan took the form of a serpent when he deceived our first parents and led them into sin. Then the Lord cursed the serpent and its offspring. It could be asked, did the Lord curse Satan or snakes in general? As I read the text, the answer is yes, both. So now the Lord is using a cursed creature to do his bidding.

But can he do that? On the surface, it doesn’t seem right. But on further reflection we recall that all things serve his purposes, both the good and the evil. To be sure, the curse the Lord places on all creation is for humankind’s good, to help us see the futility of life without a proper relationship with the Lord. It’s to drive us back to him – as these snakes are doing for Israel. It’s because of their suffering that they confess their guilt and cry out to Moses to pray to the Lord for them to take the snakes away.

But the Lord doesn’t take the snakes away. He has a different solution to the people’s problem. He directs Moses to fashion a “fiery serpent” of bronze. He is then to lift up this non-living, non-biting, safe “fiery serpent” on a pole. Thereafter, when anyone is bitten by a real snake, all they have to do is look at the snake on the pole and they will be cured. No medicine, no anti-venom; just *look* at the snake on the pole. Then you will live.

Now it’s easy to imagine someone saying, “That’s ridiculous. How can looking at something cure snakebite? I don’t believe that’s possible.” You know what? The Israelites who said that died. But those who believed the Lord’s promise and looked lived. The point being that some measure of faith in God’s Word was required. Those who *believed* and looked were saved. It wouldn’t have taken a lot of faith; faith as tiny as a mustard seed that said, “I’m doubtful, but at least I’ll give it a try” – that’s all it would have taken. And if a person like that got bitten a second time, why, there wouldn’t be any hesitation about what to do, would there?

All right, this being Good Friday, the day on which we most heavily focus our attention on our Lord’s passion and death for our sin, you probably have a pretty good idea where I’m going with this. We remember the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” There is a direct biblical connection that our Lord himself makes between the snake on the pole and Jesus on the cross and looking to them in faith to live.

Ah, but before we get there, I want to add another idea that will help make the connection. It has to do with being lifted up. I mean, why did Moses need to raise up the bronze serpent on a pole? Was it just to increase visibility? So people could see it from a greater distance? And would it not have worked its cure if it sat on a table or on the ground?

The answer lies in the dual way the Scriptures use the verb that means “to lift up”. There are occasions when it means something very good. Then it means to be exalted. Other times it’s not good. Then it means to be cursed or condemned as in “cursed is one who hangs on a tree.” A good example of this contrast in meaning appears when Joseph is in prison and he interprets the dreams of the Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker. He tells them both that they will be “lifted up”. The cupbearer will be “lifted up” when he is restored to his high position at Pharaoh’s court; the baker “lifted up” when he is hanged – or more likely, impaled on a stake.

This dual meaning for being “lifted up” comes into play in the fiery serpent story. Satan – the original “fiery serpent” whose bite was the venom of sin – tried to lift himself up. He wanted

to exalt himself above God. The result was that he was cursed. The serpent lifted up on the pole is a picture of that – both Satan’s attempt at self-exaltation and the price he paid for it. But then we read the words from Isaiah speaking of the Lord’s suffering servant: “Behold [that is, *look*], my servant shall act wisely; he *shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted*. That is to say Jesus, the Lord’s servant, will be lifted up – in both senses. But it’s the opposite of what happened with Satan. First Jesus is lifted up in the sense of being cursed when he was “wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities”. As St. Paul also says, “Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

But Isaiah also speaks of Jesus being lifted up in terms of exaltation. It happens “when his soul makes an offering for sin, [then] *he shall see his offspring*” that is, he will see those who are saved by his work of atonement. And “*the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand*”, that is, he will achieve great things in accordance with the Lord’s will. And then, “Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and *he shall divide the spoil with the strong*”, which is to say he’ll earn the reward he has coming. St. Paul also speaks of Christ’s exaltation – his being lifted up – after his “being cursed” where he writes, “he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death of a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.”

Satan’s proud attempt to lift up himself brought death to man and resulted in his condemnation. Jesus’ allowing himself to be lifted up to suffer the humiliation, condemnation, and wrath of God we deserve brought life to man and resulted in Christ’s exaltation.

And now we who are still on the journey through the desert of this world, who still have a short way to go, when we are bitten by Satan’s accusations, when we feel the burning of sin, when our consciences are aflame with guilt and shame, when fearing our just punishment we feel the heat of hellfire, we know what to do. We know where to direct our gaze: to Jesus who was lifted up, who bore our curse, who suffered for our transgressions, who became sin for us. He is our cure. And he has since been exalted to the highest of all places. So we too, humbling ourselves, casting off all pride and self-righteousness to receive his gracious gift as beggars, we too will be exalted at the journey’s end. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!