

## Weekly Reading – Monday, March 16, 2009

We turn our attention now to the lessons for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 22, 2009. In the Old Testament and Gospel lessons we have a typological theme and image with the serpent lifted up on the pole. The epistle lesson is a key text from St. Paul, a particular favorite of John Wesley who preached countless sermons on Ephesians 2: 9. Moreover, these texts confront us with the Christ kerygma in an age and time when what we often hear is an easier, less demanding and less powerful Jesus kerygma.

Number 21: 4 - 9

The people of Israel are in the midst of the wilderness journey between Red Sea and Promised Land. As happens time and again, "the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses." In the course of any longer transition from old to new it's difficult to be patient isn't it? Still, I don't recall the people being indicted, previously, for impatience. More often the charge is simply that they complained or "murmured" against Moses and God. Here "impatience" is called out, and manifested in the people's lament, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" That clearly, indicates a loss of faith in God, God's presence and purposes. Such a loss of faith cannot be without consequence. The consequence is death, in the form of poisonous snakes. Frightened and chastened the people appeal to Moses who turns to the Lord on their behalf. Moses is instructed to make a snake of bronze and lift it up upon a pole. When people who have been bitten look upon the serpent raised up on the pole, they shall live. This story is of course the origin of the medical/ druggist symbol of the serpent coiled around the pole. When we turn to the gospel lesson we shall see how the New Testament interprets the cross of Christ through the lens of this story. In both cases, human beings need something to counteract poison and deathly power. Turning toward that which God provides offers healing and life.

Ephesians 2: 1 - 10

This well known passage provides an important interpretative lens for the other two lessons, framing the human situation as a dire one: "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world . . . All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh . . . and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else." Thus does Paul describe the human situation. Some object that Paul has overstated things rather drastically and that while some may need help and forgiveness, most of us are, well, okay or pretty good. No, says Paul, the situation is dire. Apart from God's mercy, we are dead. By that Paul does not mean that we shall not one day inherit eternal life. He means we are living under the dual powers of Sin and Death, which reign like terrible monarchs across the earth, at present. Like the disobedient Israelites in the wilderness, we are dead-men-walking. Again, this will seem to many like a rather extreme diagnosis. But, take a look at the newspaper (if you still have one), the television news or what unfolds all around you, and ask: is this really an overstatement or mis-statement, or rather an honest statement of our true situation? We need help! We need a Savior! Human nature needs a Savior! At verse 4 Paul makes the turn in his argument, "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 this is God's doing, all God's doing, all by God's grace. Apart from God, we're in deep do-do. In the remainder of the passage Paul enlarges on and interprets God's act of grace. Only in the final verse do we begin to glimpse ethics: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works . . ." Today, one seldom hears this gospel kerygma preached. Rather we get encouragement to do better, some education, some entertainment. But these will not really make any difference, they do not go deep enough, they do not tell the truth about us or about God.

John 3: 14 - 21

The basic framing provided by the Old Testament lesson and Ephesians should be kept in mind when we turn to this week's Gospel reading. Just as Numbers depicts human beings as needing some intervention to be freed and healed from poison and death, and Ephesians understands our condition without God to be dead already, so John also paints in clear and sharp contrasts. For John the dominate metaphor is, however, a different one, light and dark. In place of Numbers poison and Paul's living death, John sees the world as shadowed in darkness. God has sent the light into the world to save us. But the coming of the light is both salvation and judgment. How we respond to the light reveals the truth about us. Some move toward the light, looking upon Jesus lifted up and believing. These have life. But others turn away from the light, scurrying for dark corners and deep shadows. For them God's light is a form of judgment, exposing their nature and decision. In all three lessons, we have clear commonalities. First, there is a grim diagnosis of the human situation: poisonous, dead, darkness. Second, into all three grim realities, God sends mercy and healing. There is help. Third, some turn to God and are saved and healed; while some turn away unto death. This is the essence of these passages. For contemporary readers/ hearers it is difficult to hear the John passage without all sorts of issues around religious inclusivity/ exclusivity ("Are only Christians saved?") intruding. I tend to think these are our questions and not the questions the text addresses. I am pretty sure that "believing in him," (John 3: 17) means more than joining the right team, tribe or religion. So we ought to be cautious about wandering off into the thickets of our religiously pluralistic situation and making that the issue. This passage, and all these passages, are rather putting before us the choice of life and death and urging that we choose life by trusting in God's power and not in our own. They are all telling us, in contrast to Enlightenment and modern canons, that human beings are not basically good people in need of education; we are sinners in need of redemption.