

Cross Walk: Costly Love
Numbers 21:4-7; John 3:14-21
March 19, 2006

This weekend as we mark the third anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq war, *Newsweek* magazine has a poignant cover story about Commander Richard Jadick.¹ He is a Navy doctor who volunteered to be a combat surgeon on the front lines in Iraq during the battle for Fallujah. Jadick knows that, depending on the injury, three to fifteen minutes can mean the difference between life and death. He pushed his armored ambulance and medical team as close as possible to the front lines in order to be ready to assist injured Marines immediately. Stories are told of several soldiers whose lives were saved by Dr. Jadick, as well as some who did not live. This physician, husband, and father of an infant daughter risked his life so that others might live. That indeed is the risk taken and the gift given by all members of the armed forces, for which we are grateful.

This morning's scriptures address such powerful acts of self-giving love for others. They demonstrate the depth of God's love for the world.

The book of Numbers offers a brief glimpse of the Hebrew people's journey from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness. We find them complaining about the lack of food and water. Even while they were slaves at least they had water to drink and food to eat. Their complaints are met by a plague of poisonous snakes. The people recognize their sin and confess. The Lord accepts their repentance. Moses is instructed to set up a bronze image of a snake in the middle of the camp, placed high on a pole so that everyone may see it. Then Moses tells the people that when they are bitten by the snakes, if they look at the bronze serpent, they will not die. But if they do not want to look at the bronze serpent, they will die.

What is this serpent on a pole? Is it a new wonder-drug, a new medical procedure? Neither. The act of turning the head and looking at the serpent is symbolic of turning towards God to acknowledge the source of our help. It is a turning of the heart toward the mercy and power of God. Healing does not come from the serpent itself, but from the promise of God toward which it points. Those poisoned by the snake are powerless, without knowledge or resources to save themselves. Gazing upon the serpent is an act of casting themselves upon the presence and power of God, who gives health, healing, and wholeness. The people look at the image of death and find forgiveness and health beyond it. Looking at the bronze serpent is looking toward God.

This serpent on a pole is a peculiar foreshadowing of the crucifixion of Christ. John's Jesus recalls this story in his conversation with Nicodemus. John is interested in the idea of "lifting up," which for him is exaltation. As Moses lifted up the bronze serpent as the remedy for the snake's venom in the wilderness, so Jesus Christ lifted up on the cross is the remedy for the poisons of sin and death. As the Israelites are invited to look at the snake in order to be saved, all people are invited to look to Jesus, to believe into Jesus, which really means to immerse themselves in his saving power.

In the wilderness the solution is a snake lifted up on a pole because the problem was poisonous snakes on the ground. Thus in John the solution is a human (the Word made flesh) on a tree because the problem is the humans on the ground. Our problem is that we are humans separated from our God, and so the solution is a human being lifted up on a cross so that we might look at him and live. As we gaze upon Jesus on the cross, we realize the depth of God's love for us, we turn toward God, and we are saved from our self-centered ways.

Lucy once said to Charlie Brown, "Discouraged again, eh, Charlie Brown?" "You know what your trouble is. The whole trouble with is that you're you."

Charlie asks, "Well, what in the world can I do about that?"

Lucy answers, "I don't pretend to be able to give out advice. I merely point out the trouble!"

The symbol of Jesus on the pole points out that the trouble is with us and that Jesus is the solution.

John says, "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... God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

The image of the serpent is a kind of homeopathic medicine – medicine that heals by replicating the disease. This points toward the way that God chooses to redeem the world, not by abandoning the world nor by destroying the world, but by entering into that world. The Word becomes flesh in order to redeem the flesh. Christ camps among sinful humanity in order to save humanity from itself. God is willing to enter into our human condition and experience it fully, even to the point of death. That's the price of our redemption. There is nothing that we experience that God does not know. God heals by sharing our condition with us. That's why when we look at Christ lifted up on the cross, we find the saving power of God. The

cross symbolizes the deep and profound love of God for us. It is homeopathic salvation – healing by experiencing our condition.

The thrust of John's gospel is the love of God for the world – love so active, so full, so passionate that it is expressed in the giving of God's child. God doesn't want us to be judged and condemned. God doesn't want to be separated from us by your wrongdoings. Jesus shows us how to live with God, how to participate in the life of God, how to receive and respond to the love of God. God becomes one of us, a human being vulnerable to pain and death, because God's love for us is so vast and deep.

A woman writes about one of the strangest and most haunting incidents in her childhood involving the bite of a serpent. The Field Museum in Chicago, where her father worked, had a small collection of live animals, as well as the stuffed and mounted ones on display. It happened that one of the herpetologists on staff was working late in his office one night, taking notes on some snakes the museum had just acquired. One was of particular interest, because no one had ever catalogued the species.

Somehow in the course of studying this snake, the herpetologist was bitten. He realized immediately that it was poisonous, and also knew that because the species was unknown, it was likely that there was no antivenom that would be effective. The rest of the museum was deserted, except for a few guards on the main floor, far away from the office where he was bitten.

The scientist must have decided there was no point in calling for help. Instead he returned to his desk and began writing, describing each symptom as he experienced it. The following morning, when other employees arrived, the herpetologist was slumped over his desk, dead. His notes told the story of what happened, and left a legacy for those who continued his work. The autopsy would provide information on how the poison worked, and lead to an appropriate antivenom. He felt the full sting of the serpent in order that others might be saved and live.²

Hear Eugene Peterson's translation of John: "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again." (*The Message*)

God's love for humanity is so great that God comes to show us the way to life, eternal life, whole and lasting life. The gift of eternal life is not a reward in some future existence. Eternal life is life lived in the unending presence of God. It begins here and now when we "believe in" Jesus, which really has the sense of immersing ourselves in Jesus' presence. Belief is not

so much intellectual assent to ideas and theories as it is a giving of one's heart to something. When we believe in Jesus, we give our heart to Jesus, and Jesus leads us to life in the unending presence of God, eternal life.

The Gospel of John portrays Jesus as a friend who freely chooses to "go to calamity's depths" for his friends. John's Jesus is very different than Mark's suffering servant. Jesus is not a victim; he freely lays down his life (10:17-18). The idea of friendship was important in the religious culture. Jews and Christians spoke of friendship with God as the ultimate goal of life. Jesus wanted his friends to have friendship with God. He was prepared to make great sacrifices for the well-being of his friends, even to risk his life. In John's Gospel, Jesus is a friend who freely lays down his life for his friends (10:11-18; 15:13-17).³

It is the story of the great lion Aslan in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. Aslan takes the place of Edmund on the Stone Table, sacrificing his life so that his friend might live. But there was a power deeper than the witch's evil power. "When a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."⁴ Thus, the friendly lion who freely lays down his life for his friend is raised to new life. That, of course, is the rest of Jesus' story, the coming attraction in the weeks ahead!

For now we ponder the truth that God so loved the world
that God lifted up a pole on which we see Jesus –

Jesus who wept for the children of darkness;
Jesus who was lifted up to shine in the darkness and lead us to light.
By God's enduring light we see ourselves as we are
both sinner and saved,
both lost and loved,
both bereft and befriended.

When we give ourselves to this divine love story and immerse
ourselves in this wondrous love, we receive the gift of eternal life, of
friendship with God. God wants to be your friend. That's how much God
loves you.

Prayer

Divine Lover, we indeed are amazed at your wondrous love. You reach out across time and space to offer us your presence. There are no boundaries to your love. No matter how far we try to run away from you, you are always there, waiting to embrace us when we return. You bless us, O wondrous one, in ways beyond measure.

Forgive us for our foolish refusal of your loving presence in our lives. Too often we try to go it alone, flexing our independence. But we confess that we are vulnerable. We have need of you. We are grateful that Jesus shows us that trust in you is a sign of strength, not weaknesses. You bring completeness and wholeness to our lives, O Holy One.

Embrace in your bounteous love all your people of every nation, race, and creed. Help us to grow in our love of one another, that the tensions that divide us and cause so much pain might cease. May your Spirit of peace blow through Iraq, calming fears and arousing understanding. May your Spirit once again walk through Palestine and Israel, where Jesus walked, planting seeds of reconciliation and hope for all people. Shed your Spirit upon other troubled nations that new life might be born out of the ashes of despair.....

¹ Pat Wingert and Evan Thomas, "On Call in Hell," *Newsweek*, March 20, 2006, pp. 34-43.

² Rev. Chris Shiber, Montclair United Methodist Church, Oakland, CA, March 30, 2003.

³ Barbara E. Reid, "The Cross and Cycles of Violence," *Interpretation*, Vol. 58, No. 4, October, 2004, pp. 378-379.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1950), p. 160.

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