

032209 Fourth Sunday in Lent

In the Old Testament – there is a writing called The Book of Numbers – it provides a mix of history and law and teachings... it has the account of two censuses of the Hebrew people – one taken near the beginning of, and one near the end of their journey in the desert. And within that journey story are many experiences: good and flawed humanity... jealousy, revolt, idolatry, and there is that famous story that Jesus made reference to in today's Gospel... It is the inspired teaching concerning Moses making a bronze serpent... and people being made well from looking to it for healing.

When we have a story... a reading like that Moses snake tale, what does it mean to you? How do you understand it? Would you dismiss it as some sort of an old myth or a story from around the campfires? I'll let you ponder my question – perhaps wrestle with it for a moment.

Now let us contrast the Old Testament story from the Book of Numbers with the reading we just had in John's Gospel.... In today's Gospel, Jesus is meeting with Nicodemus who was a ruler of the Jews. And in the Old Testament, we recall that Moses was a leader – a ruler of the Jews. And then, here in John's Gospel, Jesus, who is seen as the New Moses is talking with Nicodemus who is a ruler of the Jews.

Jesus says – “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Now – would Jesus make reference to a portion of the Book of Numbers which is just some sort of old campfire tale? Or could it be that there is a similarity to what would happen with Jesus – that is – His being lifted up on a pole... the wood of the Cross?

In the Old Testament – the symbolic evil plaguing the Jews -- the poisonous snake is lifted up to God with the prayer of Moses to heal the ones filled with poison... to turn that which is certain death over to God who can cure and heal all things. Contrast that early theology of the Jews with our understanding of the Cross: Jesus becomes sin and is lifted up as an offering and an intercession to the Father. This is done on our behalf.

Mankind is filled with the poison of sin and is made well by Christ making an offering of Himself. And – are we not given an earthly reprieve from snakebite (sin)? Yes, we are given eternal life by Christ's willingness to be the offering for everyone who believes in Him.

A few years ago, a group of parishioners from our Colorado church made a long drive to go to hear Dr. Scott Hahn giving a half-day teaching on Scripture and Church teachings.... For me – it was my third time listening to Dr. Hahn.... I have met him and talked to him.... I hope you know of him – he's a former Protestant minister – a most famous Scripture scholar --- and he and his wife are now Catholic.

The one thing that continually pours forth from this man who is such a gift to the Church is his teaching point about Scripture: We can look to the New Testament as the fulfillment of the teachings of the Old Testament – and that the Old Testament prepares us for understanding all that unfolds in the New Testament.

So when we consider the first reading for today, can we not see what is being said about the messengers of God being mocked and scoffed at? These were the prophets... and the holy ones urging the Jews to remain faithful to the covenant of love with God.

And in the Gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus that just as Moses lifted up the evil symbol in the desert – so too will He be rejected... and He will become a sin-offering. And then, by that sign, people who believe shall be made well and they will have eternal life.

I hope you have a good Catholic Bible at home... because I'm going to ask you to consider spending time preparing for Holy Week. The way to do this is by prayerfully entering into Scripture... the daily and weekend Mass readings can be fruitful to help us enter into the passion narrative and other readings for Holy Week.

Yes – we have two weeks before Holy Week gets started... but on Wednesday, we have the Annunciation of our Lady – a solemnity worth re-reading about in Scripture. Mary is greeted by Archangel Gabriel and agrees to become pregnant with life... the pregnancy which brings new life to mankind.

In the days coming, there are Mass readings in which Moses intercedes for his people... just as Jesus, the New Moses will intercede with the Father for us... There is a reading coming which tells us that a grain of wheat must die to produce new life... just as Jesus must die so that we may receive the gift of new life...

Come Holy Spirit – fill us with holy awe... let us feel the ruah – the very breath and life of God found in Sacred Scriptures. Help us to see that every word written by mankind was divinely inspired... and it is ready for us to explore... to consider... to probe. We need only quiet the noise about us and in the desert stillness of Lent – open our hearts to experience your words giving new life to us for Holy Week and for Easter.

Reading 1

2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23

In those days, all the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations and polluting the LORD's temple which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy. Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects. Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon, where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons until the kingdom of the Persians came to power. All this was to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah:

"Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths, during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest while seventy years are fulfilled."

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: "Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him!"

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

R. (6ab) Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
On the aspens of that land we hung up our harps.

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

For there our captors asked of us the lyrics of our songs, And our
despoilers urged us to be joyous: "Sing for us the songs of Zion!"

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

How could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land? If I forget you,
Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten!

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

May my tongue cleave to my palate if I remember you not, If I place not
Jerusalem ahead of my joy.

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

Reading II

Eph 2:4-10

Brothers and sisters: God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love
he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us
to life with Christ — by grace you have been saved —, raised us up with
him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, that in the ages

to come, He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast.

For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them.

Gospel

Jn 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who 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 might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed.

But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.