

St. Margaret's Uniting Church Mooroolbark

Sunday 11th March, 2018 – Lent 4

GOSPEL READING John 3:14-21 *For God so loved the world*

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES – Rev Arnie Wierenga

I struggle with this strange story from Numbers about serpents, being bitten and then almost taunted to look up at the very image of pain in the form of a bronze statue of snake on a stick. I was taught to be wary of idols. I remember the earlier story of Moses being absent receiving the Ten Commandments while his brother, Aaron helped make a golden calf because they felt abandoned.

It was drummed into me as a young one that we do not worship statues or images. So how can they yet look up at the serpent and live?

Serpents are like wilderness nightmares, right up there with scorpions and wolves. But Lent is full of stories pushing us into places we'd rather not be. Like when Jesus was in the wilderness alone, hungry and was tempted by the Devil. Or the years of aimless wandering of the people of Israel between release from captivity to finding the land of promise. Or perhaps our won 40 days of self-examination and hardship that is the practice of many through Lent. Or like death itself as the pathway to life.

Author and artist, Jan Richardson speaks of this story of serpents in the wilderness as 'strange remedy'. She rightly reminds us that God is intent on providing healing for the people of God. This persists – not only when we are sick or broken because of circumstances beyond our control, but even when we have brought calamity upon ourselves.

Whatever our bent, whatever our distraction or destruction as we have left God behind, yet God reaches to draw us out from the clutch of death and restore us to life. In other words, God is always looking out for our Salvation, even when we make a mess of it.

In a similar vein, the apostle Paul gives a great summary of God's action and intent in the Epistle reading set for this day. (It is listed in your printed sheets). There he says that even when we were dead through our trespasses, God, rich in mercy and great love, has made us alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5).

That echoes the strange remedy from Numbers, but it also jumps ahead a bit. First we need to hear from the gospel and what Jesus is saying in order to join strange remedies and God's intent with who Jesus is.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the cover of night because he is searching for something, even though he knows not what it is. And he is drawn to Jesus, perhaps like all of us who seek are. But the conversation is not easy, because understanding strange remedies with either head or heart is hard for all of us. And so Jesus, knowing that our friend Nic was struggling, tries to join up who he is with a story familiar to both of them.

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. (John 4:14-15).

Thanks Jesus, still not easy. Still just as strange a remedy. But like Nicodemus struggling in the night, there is something about this strangeness that will not let us go. If only we can look and see, or hear and understand what the great teacher is on about. There must be sense buried within this riddle!

Of course there is, otherwise we wouldn't be here. Salvation begins by looking in the right place...

In the case of the story of serpents and the bronze image being raised, the call to look at a dumb bronze statue of a snake wouldn't have been easy to follow. And yet the invitation to look is an invitation to trust. We cannot know or fathom the ways of God, so why would we pretend to understand? If God says look here, then to look there is a response in faith, one that was rewarded by healing and life in God's name.

And while we are unlikely to encounter serpents in wilderness wandering in quite the same way, we are actually called to trust in the same way as the ancients of Israel.

Jesus says it in today's gospel story. Look up at the Son of Man who is lifted up. Look up and believe in him. Believe in him and you will receive eternal life!

I think it is fair to say this is as strange as the story of serpents, yet somehow I find it easier to understand. By looking at Jesus it removes at least the dis-ease of looking towards bronze statues. And from childhood, I've have learned the ways of God and been invited into the dance of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And perhaps most fundamentally, this story is easier because we read it with eyes and understanding beyond Easter. We know how the story ends.

For 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 (John 3:16).

The story of Jesus Christ being lifted on a cross and finding this as a place of life and Salvation is just as strange as the snake story. But the resurrection of Jesus casts a new light on our understanding, and also bathes us in its healing light.

This is the light. That in Jesus the love, healing and life giving nature of God is fully revealed to us. God is intent of healing us even when we are broken. God is intent on healing us, even when we bring calamity upon ourselves.

Let us look up at this strange remedy. I do believe here there is light and salvation. How will you keep looking here with your eyes and heart open, that you may find the unexpected grace of life and healing in the name of Christ?