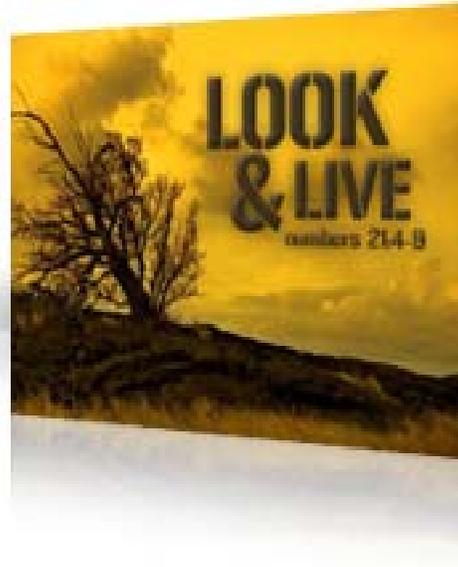


Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

So far we have largely avoided forming a new committee at St. John's. It would be known as the "the let's go back to Egypt Committee"¹ – whose focus is on what was the "golden age at St. John's." It doesn't matter if we disagree on whether it was 1950 or 1960 or 1970. What matters is that the vision is focused on the past and not on the future. The focus is not on what God is doing right now and what God is calling us to do going forwards. When this parish was forming, it was at least in part because there was no other Episcopal Church in Crawfordsville. In 1837, this was the frontier. Yes, Wabash had been founded a few years earlier with great hopes and the knowledge that "four years here will change your life, seriously" which appears on the college's webpage even today.² St. John's, Crawfordsville, provided a church home to the Episcopal students attending Wabash. In Native American terms, St. John's was one of the items in the sacred bundle of this parish.



A sacred bundle is something the shaman would take with him or her wherever the shaman went. It represented the values and the vision of the group. According to Patricia Deveraux, a member of the Blackfeet tribe in Alberta, Canada: "These are holy bundles given to us by the Creator to hold our people together... They're the same as the relics from the Catholic Church. They are a demonstration of the Holy Spirit. They can heal people." Part of what we have been doing in the last two-and-a-half years is to consider what is in our sacred bundle. We continue to discern what it is that holds us together and makes us stronger as a community of faith than we are individually.

The image of a snake on a pole is an item that might be found in a sacred bundle. It is a symbol of God's power to heal that comes to us out of Greek mythology as well as the Biblical stories. You might, at first, think of the snake on a pole as the caduceus, a symbol we in the United States have often associated with doctors and medicine. However, the caduceus has two snakes wound around a pole and usually the pole has wings. The single snake pole is the rod of Asclepius, again associated with medicine and healing.

You may remember the story from Exodus when Moses was petitioning the Pharaoh to let God's people go. God told Moses to take his staff and lay it down – and when Moses did it became a snake. Up a staff, down a snake. Then the Pharaoh's advisors got in the act and they put their staffs down and lo and behold they also became snakes. Up- a staff, down a snake. Finally, God said *enough* and the staff of Moses became a snake that ate the snakes of the Pharaoh's advisors. God prevails.

¹ From Feasting on the Word Year B, Vol. 2 for the Fourth Sunday in Lent. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, General Editors.

² <http://www.wabash.edu/aboutwabash/history.cfm> (March 14, 2015)

The snake is one of the creatures created by God when all creatures were created. It, too, was among the creatures that Genesis tells us God named as “good” and indeed, “very good.” But along the way the snake becomes associated in our minds with the Devil, with Satan, with evil. And, in the beginning of the lesson from Numbers, the snake is poisonous and its bite kills people. God is frustrated with the “Let’s go back to Egypt” Committee and sends poisonous snakes to remind people that God is in control. God’s vision for the people – whom God has chosen over all other peoples of the world to be a light to all the nations- remain looking backwards towards Egypt. They resist God’s call to spread the message that there is one God and that God’s vision for all of humanity is one of peace and justice and mercy. The “let’s go back to Egypt” Committee wants things they way they were. They have conveniently forgotten what it was like to be a slave in Egypt. That supposed “golden age” wasn’t really golden – or at least not for all people.

Murmuring once again, the people beset Moses. It’s your fault, Moses! Why did you lead us into the desert to die? And besides, we don’t like this food. This manna that saved our lives awhile ago, well, we’re tired of it. “Let’s go back to Egypt.”

Moses does what I hope any clergy would do in the face of the murmuring, grumbling, finger-pointing and misery. He prays. Moses asks God, I’m sure, for wisdom and patience and for a solution. For a way to help the people see that “let’s go back to Egypt” is not an answer. That God has a plan – a vision for this people that means moving forward and not remaining rooted in the past. So God tells Moses to make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole. And if anyone is bitten, all they need to do is look at the pole and the person will be healed. I can just imagine the laughter and scorn: “yea, right, you want me to look at a snake on a pole when it’s a snake that bit me in the first place? Are you nuts?” “Yes”, Moses says, “what has been a bite because of your sin of refusing to trust in God, a bite that now threatens to end your life- yes, God can and does use the very same instrument to heal you and to help you learn to trust in God again.”

God didn’t take the snakes away – but rather transformed an encounter with a snake – an encounter that happened because of sin and a refusal to trust in God – into one that redeemed the sinner and gave new life to the one bitten. The means of healing was to look on the pole – to look up because the pole was held high so all could see- nothing hidden here. Looking at the pole was available to all – no favorites and no prerequisites to healing. Look at the pole. See God’s power. Turn your hearts back to your creator. Look forward and not back.

Make no mistake. It is not the pole or the snake on the pole that made healing possible. It was trust and faith in God – the pole was merely a symbol. A symbol is something that points to a greater truth. It is not the truth but a signpost of what lies beyond the symbol.

For us, we do not have a snake. We have a cross. We have the crucifix of Good Friday. We have Jesus’ human body nailed to the cross. We also have the empty cross. The cross that reminds us of God’s great power to overcome the wickedness of the world. The cross that reminds us that Jesus was resurrected and then ascended into heaven – that the Son of Man was lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Jesus hung on a cross that all who saw and who believe are given new life. The night of confusion and doubt and wandering is not forever for those who look and those who believe. As the psalmist reminds us, God has sent forth his word and healed them and saved them from the grave. (Ps. 107:20). God's mercy endures forever (Ps. 107:1).

We are called, however, to do something after we receive God's mercy. We are to give thanks and to tell of God's acts with shouts of joy (Ps. 107: 21-22). We are not to stay rooted in the past. We are to live each day in the light of God's love for us and for the world.

Change is not always easy. For some, change is more difficult than for others. But a question to ask yourself: "if I don't like change, how do I feel about becoming irrelevant"? The Rev. Dr. Chuck Robertson, who is Canon to our Presiding Bishop, has asked that question in conversations about the future of the church, and particularly the future of the Episcopal Church. Chuck tells of his time in England where he worked with parishes in the Church of England and with the people of Great Britain. In asking many people about their feelings about the Church, many of them said the church was irrelevant to their lives. "Why would I go?" was the response time and again. It wasn't "why wouldn't I go" but "why would I go."

They had no snake on a bronze pole – they had no experience of Jesus on the cross, giving his life that we might have life- the church was, plain and simple, irrelevant to their lives. They saw the church, by and large, as a "Let's go back to Egypt" committee. Too focused on the past. Too hidebound. Too much "but we've always done it this way." They didn't see God's vision lived out by those who attended church. Duty. Obligation. No joy in what God has done for us through Jesus the Christ. No proclamation of the Word made flesh.

As we continue in our journey towards discerning the call of God for this parish, ask yourself what is it about St. John's that will be appealing to a newcomer? What part will you play in welcoming the stranger in our midst? Are you willing to trust in God and that there is a vision that appeals to those outside our doors and in which each of us has a part to play? Are you willing to set aside your nostalgia for the past- and much of the past was good- and consider how you and I and others might be called upon to change to more closely reflect the reality of 2015 and beyond. Change is not always easy for us. Our gifts and talents may need to be stretched or reconfigured. Everything we try may not work out the way we hoped and yet, hopefully, we learn something both from our successes and our failures. Sometimes what looks like a failure really just needs a little tweaking. Sometimes a failure is just that: something that we tried that did not accomplish – and won't accomplish – what we dreamed. A failure is not the end of the road unless we refuse to be honest and to consider the way forward by focusing only on the past.

Wabash says that "four years here will change your life, seriously." Well, your time here at St. John's will change your life, seriously. Being part of a community of faith that believes in the message of God sent through Jesus, that love conquers all and that the light represented by Jesus overcomes the darkness, can make an incredible, life-changing difference in who you are and in how you relate to the world. Check your knee-jerk "we've always done it that way" response at the door. Take a chance that a new way of doing things might bring light and life to this parish. Be willing to step out, with those seated beside and around you, into the wonderful world that God has created. God loves us, whether we want God's love or not. God offers us life and life

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

abundantly, if we will turn our backs on Egypt and dare to walk into the future with hope. Lent is the perfect time to ponder God's call to us in this place and this time.

In these last few weeks of Lent, ponder how you might be a light to the world. And remember that your presence here is St. John's matters and matters deeply. Without you, we may remain stuck looking backwards and not forwards. Without you, we may not survive or at least we will not obtain our full potential as children of God, loved- will we, won't we- by a God who risked all to become human. Your time here at St. John's will forever change you- seriously- so won't you come along on the journey and find out who God wants you to be? I hope you will. **Amen.**