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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

March 10, 2024

Year B, 4 Lent, Revised Common Lectionary

[Numbers 21:4-9](#)

[Ephesians 2:1-10](#)

[John 3:14-21](#)

[Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22](#)

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We marched into the church today behind a cross on a pole. Since it's Lent, the crosses are veiled, an old custom that heightens the starkness and simplicity of this season. But we know it's there: the sign of our salvation, the sign of our identity in Christ. Just as a regiment might march behind its flag or a group marching in a parade might march behind its banner, we use a processional cross as a way of putting this central sign of our faith up high where everyone can see it.

In today's scripture readings we heard first of a bronze snake being lifted up high, and then of Jesus speaking about himself being lifted up high in the same way. The first story is from the book of Exodus, from the wandering of the people of God in the desert. In this story God is angry with them and sends poisonous snakes among them, yet also provides a remedy. It's a powerful image somehow, isn't it? This bronze snake on a pole, up high so that when someone is bitten they can look to it before they die and be cured. It seems somehow to be an example of sympathetic magic, that old idea that like cures like. The snake, a symbol of danger and death, here becomes the remedy for the very thing it stands for.

And so in our Gospel reading Jesus looks back through the centuries to this foundational story from the Torah and he applies it to himself—to his crucifixion. Just as the bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole by Moses to be a sign and instrument of healing, so Jesus too will be lifted up to be a new sign and instrument of healing—healing not just of the body but of the body and the spirit. And here too like cures like: the cross, an instrument of execution, a symbol of humans' cruelty to one another, will become in the paradoxical wisdom of God an instrument not of cruelty but of love, not of death but of life.

Today it is that for us. We make the sign of the cross on the brow of newly baptized Christians, physically inscribing them with the sign of Jesus' love for us and our identity in him. Many of us make that sign on our own bodies as an act of prayer, when entering the church or at certain moments in worship or at any time as a way of identifying ourselves with the one who has entered into the fullness of sorrow and suffering as one of us, and through that act has brought us new life. In my own spiritual practice I find the sign of the cross to be one of the only things I can do sometimes that feels at all adequate when I learn of a great tragedy or injustice or atrocity. For me to make the sign of the cross in those occasions is a way of invoking God's compassion and solidarity with those who are suffering. At other times it's a sign of blessing and love and protection, as when I make the sign of the cross over one of my children, or a newly married couple, or over myself in response to receiving Communion. There is power in this physical act, a prayer made tangible when we mark our bodies with the sign of salvation and identify ourselves with Christ. There is power in the sign of the cross.

And yet Christians haven't always used this sign rightly. Back in the year 312 the emperor Constantine had a vision of a cross in the sky shortly before winning a civil war against his rival. He would go on to make Christianity the favored religion of Rome, ending the era when it was an illegal and sometimes persecuted faith, but also ushering in a new era when Christians would find it suddenly easy to align themselves with worldly power—a temptation the church has found all too alluring ever since. Some of the fruits of that alignment have been church- and state-sponsored persecution against Jews; wars like the Crusades waged in the name of Christ against Muslims and others; churches blessing colonialism and the slave trade. Today still Christians are often tempted to use worldly power to force others to obey them and to mingle faith with nationalism in ways that compromise both a faith that loves and prizes all without regard to nationality and a healthy civic love of country that should honor and respect all without regard to religion.

When we as Christians succumb to the temptation to use worldly power and dress it up with the cross, we're using what you might call the power to push. The power to coerce others, to force them, to push them into doing what you want. The Roman Empire understood the power to push, as have empires ever since. And of course in the way Rome used it the cross was a prime symbol of that coercive power, that power to push others around by force, and to make an example of them in a painful and public execution if they didn't comply.

But Jesus exercises a very different power. He speaks about it in another passage later in the gospel of John when he again will take up this theme of being lifted up. “When I am lifted up from the earth,” Jesus says, “I will draw all to myself.” I will *draw* all to myself. This is a different power, not the power to push but the power to attract—a magnetic power. The power not of forcing others to do what you want them to but of an example that is so compelling, so attractive, so beautiful, that it can’t be resisted. That’s Jesus’ type of power. That’s God’s type of power.

“When I am lifted up,” he says; and we might remember that when you come down to it it’s not the cross at all but Jesus who is being lifted up. The cross is a symbol, a symbol for us of Jesus, and it’s a good one, but symbols can be used in all kinds of ways, and misused. But the true sign of our faith, the true instrument of our salvation, our true bronze snake, isn’t just a symbol but a person. He is the crucified and risen one. And what is irresistible about him is the power of his love; a love that will not fail to draw us, and those we love, and those we do not love, to him, to his very heart; a love that embraces all.