

Sermon: Uplifted

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

11 March 2018

Based on **Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21**

Several of us are currently reading a book called *The Future of Faith* by Prof. Harvey Cox. We're only in chapter two but, as it happens, that chapter sort of speaks to today's readings.

Prof. Cox wrote that 'human beings might be defined as [...] stubborn creatures who cannot stop asking why and then asking why they ask why' (26).

The Israelites in the passage from Numbers have had it. They want to know why they were brought up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness. They're impatient with all the wandering and now they have spoken out against not just Moses, but against God. The people seem to have forgotten that in Egypt, they were slaves. And it sounds as if God has become a little frustrated too, because when the people ask, 'why?' God responds by sending poisonous snakes.

This is tough love at its toughest.

The water and food supply in the wilderness is spotty, and the Israelites are getting tired of the *journey*. On top of all that, their bread tastes terrible. In a way, they're implying that what God provides is unreliable, so the Lord gives them a taste of the real world where bad things sometimes happen. Once they realize they have sinned, they begin to pray.

So, the Lord, perhaps still a little peeved, said to Moses, make a serpent out of bronze and set it on a pole; that should help. *And that's the end of the story*. The snakes are never mentioned again, and the complaining stopped.

The bronze snake serves as a reminder that magic can happen, and that magic is supernatural and divine. Here's the difference between faith in magic and faith in God: if looking up at the snake reminded people to lift up their hearts to God, then it was sacred; otherwise, it was just another idol. I think the idea is as described in Psalm 121: when we lift our eyes up and look to God – and only God – for help, we get it.

In John's Gospel, we're reading the second half of a dialog Jesus has with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to him by night, which reflects his caution in meeting with Jesus and with being in spiritual darkness, because he *doesn't* get it.

Bear in mind that the people who wrote and compiled Numbers were writing for their own community, not for John's, but John used it to make a theological point: look up at the snake and live; look up to the Son of Man and live eternally in the light of God.

The Book of Wisdom says: 'For the one who turned towards it was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you, the Savior of all. For neither herb nor poultice cured them, but it was your word, O Lord, that heals all people' (Wisdom 16:7, 12).

In 1913, in his battle against a railroad monopoly, attorney Louis Brandeis wrote that 'Sunlight is said to be the best disinfectant.' John obviously felt the same way when he wrote, 'And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil' (John 3:19).

The light *has* come into the world through Jesus Christ.

For a lot of people, the world seems pretty dark, through no fault of their own. Whether their life's circumstances have taken a downturn, or they have somehow ended up living in a war zone, or if some addiction or illness has grabbed hold of them, for a lot of people coming into the light is nearly impossible. In his letter to the church in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote, 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate' (Romans 7:15). Sometimes, we just can't help ourselves.

For all those who struggle, Jesus says that salvation comes to those who put their faith and trust in God. But those who do evil – who actively and purposely do evil – hate this stuff and will not repent and return to God.

Prof. Cox wrote that faith does not mean 'belief in' (27). What we're reading aren't just words in the Bible; we read the Bible to help orient us toward the mystery that provoked us to ask 'why' in the first place.

And 'why' is answered in John 3:16 – '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.' Anyone who has ever watched a professional football game on television has seen this Scripture held up on a sign in the stands, usually in the end zone.

This is the Good News: God did this for us, but we must decide for ourselves to accept this freely-given offer of salvation. And Lent is the perfect time to consider it.

Cynthia Woolever, research director of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, a writer and editor, and a sociologist and consultant who works with congregations, wrote that, ‘When a church finds a genuine human need in the community and develops ways to address that need, it thrives.’

Our support for Katherine House is an outreach ministry that fills a genuine human need, and we hope it will grow beyond what it is now.

For the church to *thrive*, we need to be present and visible in the community. And that’s what we as a congregation are trying to do. Later this week, Craig and Sherri and I are meeting with some town leaders – the school superintendent, the high school principal, and so on – to talk about ‘opportunities for collaboration’ and how to involve New North Church in relevant ways that won’t cost us any money.

In my opinion, New North Church does stand in the light, as it has always stood in the light, from its founding, to its taking a role in abolition before it was fashionable, and to its modern-day outreach both locally and beyond our borders. Ours is a faith seeking understanding, and purpose. We look to the Cross for strength and salvation, but we look beyond the Cross to see where Jesus is at work in the world.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, which is also a reading for today, Paul wrote that by grace we have been *saved through faith*, a gift of God, but we have been *created for good works*, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Amen.