

Fourth Sunday of Lent – B
Fr. Chad S. Green
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
14 March 2021

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23
Psalm 137
Ephesians 2:4-10
(John 3:16) John 3:14-21

Rejoice! Because God So Loved the World

Lent began on the First Sunday with the Gospel account of the Temptation of Jesus. In each of the other Sundays of Lent, during this current Year B of our cycle of readings, Jesus makes some kind of reference to the purpose for His coming into our world: that is, to take up His Cross, to die, and rise again.¹ This is also the purpose of Lent: that is, to help us get better at being Jesus' disciples, by following Him, and entering into His Death and Resurrection.

The Second Sunday of Lent—*The Transfiguration*: as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus told Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone what they had seen, “except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” And the three were left wondering “what rising from the dead meant.”²

Last week, on the Third Sunday of Lent—*The Cleansing of the Temple*: when the Jews asked Him to show them a sign for why He was causing such a disturbance, He said, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” They didn't understand that “he was speaking about the temple of his body.” Later, “when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered” and came to believe what “Jesus had spoken.”³

This week, the Fourth Sunday of Lent—Jesus' secret meeting with the Pharisee, Nicodemus: we didn't hear the first part of the conversation in today's Gospel, but, if you recall, Nicodemus “came to Jesus at night” and asked Him several questions. Jesus answered Nicodemus, but, like the others, Nicodemus didn't seem to fully understand what Jesus was saying to him.⁴

Jesus concluded His conversation with Nicodemus with the words we heard in the beginning of today's Gospel: "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."⁵ Nicodemus would have been familiar with Jesus' reference to Moses and the serpent lifted up in the desert, but we can guess that he probably didn't fully understand why Jesus was making that reference. That is, not until *after* Jesus' Death and Resurrection.

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We have the advantage of living in the time after Jesus' Death and Resurrection. So, to help us better understand what Jesus meant in His conversation with Nicodemus, it's important for us to reflect on what Jesus was referring to. In the Old Testament Book of Numbers, we read that, as the Israelites were making their way through the desert, out of Egypt and towards the Promised Land, the people started to grow impatient and "complained against God and Moses, 'Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!'"

The "wretched food" was the manna, or the "bread from heaven" that God gave to them each day. At one time, they were grateful for this miraculous bread that God gave them each day. Yet, as we tend to do as humans, they began to get bored with it. They began to lose gratitude for it. Even worse than that they were losing taste for the manna, they were losing trust in God's Promise to take care of them and lead them safely to the Promised Land.

Because of their complaints, God sent "serpents, which bit the people." There was something about the serpent bites that, I guess you could say, got the people's attention. (*Has anyone here ever been bitten by a snake? Whether bitten by a snake, another animal, an insect, or another person, getting bitten hurts and certainly gets one's attention!*) Furthermore, perhaps

the serpents in their midst reminded them how our first parents, Adam and Eve, had been tricked by the serpent into not trusting God.⁶ We call that the Original Sin—the first break in relationship between God and humans. By our Baptism we are cleansed of the stain of Original Sin, but we still feel its effects in that we are all sinners.

Once they came to their senses, so to speak, the people repented. They “came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned in complaining against the LORD and you. Pray to the LORD to take the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people, and the LORD said to Moses: Make a [serpent] and mount it on a pole, and everyone who has been bitten will look at it and recover.”⁷

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This episode demonstrates the pattern of our relationship with God. God created us out of love, and when we turn away from that love and look for comfort and security from things that are not God—which we call sin—God always offers a remedy and makes a way back for us into relationship with Him. When the people felt the sting of a serpent’s bite, they received a physical reminder of where their sins were leading them: not just the pain of the sin itself, but, worse yet, the incomparable pain of losing relationship with God. The only relief for that pain was to turn their faces back to God and ask for His Mercy. And, if God is rich in anything, He is rich in mercy and always quick to offer it.⁸ And, when they repented and turned back to God, they found—by looking at the lifeless serpent on the pole—that their *sins* were put to death and *they* were brought back to life.

We see this pattern over and over again throughout the Old Testament. What’s different for us now is that God has made One Way. The ways of the past were partial and various, and sometimes they sound strange to our ears. But, these ways prefigured, foreshadowed, or pointed to what God had planned for our salvation.⁹ This is what we now celebrate in our day: that God

has once-and-for-all made a way back for us into relationship with Him, through His Son, Jesus Christ. That's what we are preparing to celebrate and enter into more fully during this Season of Lent.

Lent is a Season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It's a season of becoming awake to our own sinfulness—or, in other words, our own attachment to things other than God:

- Perhaps when we spend extra time in prayer, we might feel the sting of a serpent biting at us, trying to convince us that we can't live without turning back to the electronic screen that we've given up.
- Perhaps when we give up a certain kind of food, we might feel the sting of a serpent biting at us, trying to convince us that we can't do without that candy or coffee or meat or whatever it is.
- Perhaps when we give extra financial contributions to a charity, such as Rice Bowl or CRS, we might feel the sting of a serpent biting at us, trying to convince us that we need that money for ourselves.

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Today, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, is also known as *Laetare Sunday*, which is the Latin word that means: "Rejoice!" Yes, we rejoice that Lent is more than half way over and we know we are now on our way *out* of the desert. But, we also *rejoice* that this season helps us to wake up to and become aware of the ways that we sin and put our faith in things other than God. We *rejoice* in the Good News that, because Jesus was lifted up on the Cross, sin and death have been put to death. We *rejoice* that, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead, we have been offered eternal life.

We *rejoice* that, even when we feel the sting of our own personal sin—our own personal ways that we have turned away from God—we believe that we can look to the Cross and be reminded of God's Love, His Mercy, and His Promise that we, too, will recover from our sins. We are not condemned to death, because "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."¹⁰

¹ John 12:27

² Mark 9:9-10

³ John 2:18-22

⁴ John 3:1-12

⁵ John 3:14-15

⁶ Genesis 3:1-13

Saint Ephrem (306-373): “They had to look at a serpent because it was with serpents that the children of Israel had been struck as their punishment. And why with serpents? Because they had repeated our first parents’ action. ... In this way the children of Israel were to learn that the very same serpent that had plotted Adam’s death had brought death to them, too. And so Moses hung it on the pole so that, when they saw it, its likeness would lead them to remember... They looked at the serpent and were reminded of their sin. Because they were bitten, they repented and, once again, were saved.”

⁷ Numbers 21:4-9

⁸ Ephesians 2:4

⁹ Hebrews 1:1-2

¹⁰ John 3:16