

**“A Place for Grace”**  
by Pastor Mary Anne Biggs  
The Fourth Sunday in Lent - March 15, 2015  
Numbers 21:4-9 ~ John 3:14-21

The cross, of course, is the primary symbol of our Christian faith and the heart of its central mystery. It is one of the few universal images we share with Christians of all kinds ... around the world ... and across the years. You will see one somewhere in most churches, though some intentionally refuse to hang any crosses anywhere because they see them as a kind of “graven image” that might keep people from focusing on the inner reality of Christ’s living presence. Other churches hang crucifixes ... crosses with the image of the suffering Christ upon them ... while some churches prefer empty crosses emphasizing the resurrection. Some of these church crosses are wood ... some are gold or silver ... and some are decorated with other symbols or even precious stones. I know it’s a sin, but I say with a great deal of pride that no church has a more beautiful cross than ours!

Many Christians wear a cross around their neck. These also come in a range of styles and consist of various materials, from wood or pewter to precious metals set with rare gems. Some Christian denominations make the sign of the cross when they pray in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I’ve always liked that gesture and quietly wished we practiced it, too, because it embodies Christian Trinitarian prayer in a distinctive way and reminds us that we are called to carry the cross ... and that we are under the cross ... and that we are covered by the cross. But isn’t it typical of us Christians that we have frequently fought with each other over what kind of cross to use and when to use it?

The cross has become so commonplace in Christian culture that we forget what a scandalous symbol it was at first. In the Roman world, the cross was a symbol of shame and violence ... of humiliation and execution. The sight of a cross on the edge of a city sent chills down the spine of anyone who passed by. The cross was a means of execution reserved for the worst offenders ... runaway slaves, traitors, and rebels against Roman authority. No matter how evil the crime, Roman citizens were spared the indignity of death by crucifixion. It was beneath them. So at first, people reacted to Christians embracing a cross as their special symbol the way we might react to some weird cult worshipping around an electric chair or wearing a lethal injection syringe as an icon of their god. It seemed pretty weird!

Why would we choose such a negative image? There was a great deal of discussion around the choice. The boat was one of the early contenders. It seemed a logical choice ... Noah’s ark, the stilling of the storm, fishers of men, and all that ... so much more positive ... so much easier to sell. The fish was also a prime candidate and either of those symbols would have been easier to take ... but the cross won out.

Why would they go with something like that? Maybe it was the simplicity. Two lines intersecting ... you see that everywhere you look ... in nature, in art, in architecture. You can’t escape it. What’s more, anybody can make it. You don’t have to be much of an artist to put together a cross. But I don’t think it was the simplicity. I think the cross won out because the cross is the story!

Our text today from the Hebrew Bible is a curious tale from the time of the Exodus when the Hebrews, wandering in the wilderness, are complaining against God. Again! This is the second generation after they left Egypt. Their parents complained against God ... griped about the manna ... criticized Moses ... worshipped the golden calf. They wore out God's patience until God said they could all die and the next generation would be allowed to enter the promised place. Like their parents, instead of trusting God, *these* children of Israel were griping and whining and complaining again against God and against Moses. God, at the end of all patience, sent poisonous snakes into the camp. As Phyllis Tickle describes it, "snakes in the tents, snakes in the breadbaskets and the cooking pots, snakes in the bedrolls and snakes in the cribs." It gives me the creeps just to think about it. Somebody did a study just a few years ago of what people fear most. Snakes were number one, followed by spiders, followed by public speaking. (Tell me about it.) Snakes, snakes, everywhere! The people begged the same Moses they have blamed to *please, O please intercede*, and Moses prayed to God on behalf of the people. God told Moses to hammer a serpent out of brass, and set it on a pole in the middle of the camp. Moses told the people, "When you're bitten by a snake, look up. Look up and see the brass snake. Look up and see God's provision for you. Look up and you will live."

It's an amazing story, with the surprising ironic twist ... that the very thing killing them turns out to be the thing that saves them. Therapists, psychologists, and seminary trained pastoral counselors would want us to explore the depth dimension of this story. The snakes don't go away. They're still crawling all over. People still get snake bit along the way. You can't just run away from your problems because ninety per cent of your problems are crawling around inside you. But when you face your problem courageously ... take responsibility to participate in your own healing instead of denying it or fearing it or whining on about it ... you can be healed. The children of Israel, the children of the people of the Exodus still had to live with the snakes ... but when they looked up and trusted in God, they were saved. Writes Tickle: "Eighteen months later, it was these men and women who saw the Jordan part before them and who walked across its dry bed to claim the land of milk and honey promised them by God."

It's a great story and one of the few from the old Hebrew tradition that John applies directly to Jesus. When Nicodemus the Pharisee came to Jesus in the middle of the night he was an honest seeker ... but he came with the usual academic's bag of excuses, conditions, rationalizations, ifs, buts, and what-have-yous ... and questions, questions, questions. Jesus cut to the chase and told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again. Nicodemus, the sophisticated academic turned into an unsophisticated literalist. He just couldn't get his head around Jesus' metaphor of conversion. Nicodemus needed a whole new paradigm. Nicodemus needed a radical change of thinking. Nicodemus needed a radical change of being. Nicodemus needed to start over.

Typical of the fourth gospel, in the conversation which follows it's hard to tell where Jesus stops talking and John starts talking about Jesus. But John explains what Nicodemus needs to do and why ... what we need to do and how ... by referring to this great old story from the Exodus. He said, "*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.*" Nicodemus needed to look up. You and I need to look up. When we're stuck in the muck of the messes we've made ... we need to look up. When we're pretending that things aren't so bad and that we're still in control ... we need to look up. When we're paralyzed by indecision, confused by the conundrums, and bogged down in the details ... we need to look up. When we're running scared and whining out loud ... we

need to look up. When we've come to the end of our resources and can't see the way forward ... we need to look up. When we're dog-tired, down-trodden, and snake bitten by life ... we need to look up and trust in God! And we'll be saved!

Look up, John says. Look up to Jesus. Look up to the cross. When John says "The Son of man must be lifted up" he means the cross, of course. He means also the resurrection. And he means Christ's ascension into heaven. He means the exaltation of the risen Christ to the right hand of God. And he means the adoration and worship of Jesus by God's people. He means all of it ... the whole story ... Jesus "lifted up" so that we can look up and believe and be saved.

We don't have time to unpack all the meanings of the cross of Christ in one sermon – or in one season – or in one lifetime. But I ask you to consider this today. The ugliest thing imaginable ... a coarse instrument of torture and execution used by an arrogant, dominating, violent power to enforce its will against its weakest and least powerful subjects ... has become the means of God's healing all humankind. The worst crime humanity could perpetrate ... and has always tried to perpetrate in a million individual and corporate and official ways ... the murder of God ... God has turned into the means by which we can be reconciled to God forever. That is why, in the Christian story ... it's never over! No matter how bad things may seem ... it's not over! No matter how hopeless things have become ... we have hope. Even when death has won the day, and evil parties in the streets, we stay tuned. We look up. We look to the cross and we remember ... our God can take the worst and turn it into the best. We know that after the cross, resurrection waits. Glory waits. Jesus waits and calls us to come forward.

When you read it in John, it sounds like so much metaphysical happy talk, but I'm here to tell you it happens all the time in the laboratory of real life. As a pastor, I have walked with people through some hard times. We have living testimonies of the cross lifted up right here among us. Somebody here could tell us about losing everything, no future left, and then by the power of God ... a new beginning ... a good and meaningful work ... a loving community ... a rich life after that death. Another might speak of the cross of addiction ... and a new life after overcoming that death. Yet another might tell of the cross of divorce and the death of a relationship with its dreams and hopes, and the grave time that follows ... but then a new life beyond and a second chance and rich life after that death was suffered. Someone else has learned that life can be even better than before ... more precious and vital in spite of the death of a bad diagnosis. Someone else can tell us of losing a job or a career or suffering some failure they thought they could never overcome. And then they say, "But God had something even better waiting for me that I had never dared to dream."

We know these stories and they are real. They are new versions of the mystery at the heart of our central story. So we lift up the cross of Christ. We wear it. We preach it. We live it. And we create a church, the beloved community, a place for grace where people of all kinds who are snake bitten ... dying inside and dying for some good news ... and dying in their struggle to survive in a dog eat dog world can come and see. It's not over. Look up. You see that cross? It tells us that God can take the worst things and turn them into the best things. And God isn't finished with us yet.

"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."

I'm going to say that one more time...

“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.”

It's true. God loves us. God isn't mad at us. God loves us. Nothing can separate us from that love ... not even the worst we can do ... the worst that can happen ... the worst we might do to each other ... the worst others might do to us. God loves us still! And God wants to give us life, full, overflowing, everlasting. How do we know? Look up. Look to the cross! May we pray?

Gracious God, loving Lord, comforting Spirit, sometimes we forget the story. Sometimes we fail to trust. Sometimes we get so bogged down in our stuff we walk around with eyes downcast and we can only see misery, disaster, sorrow. But we are your children, Lord. And you love us. Lift our drooping shoulders and strengthen our weak knees. Fill us with courage. Fill us with faith, hope, and love. We look up to the cross and remember. We look up to you and we are saved. Amen.