

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

THE REV. LAURA MURRAY

March 11, 2018

Year B

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Periodically, the texts we read on Sunday mornings touch on a common theme. It doesn't always happen, but once in a while, when it does, it stirs something deeper inside of me than what might be expected from an initial reading.

For instance, even though the Old Testament and John's gospel both mention snakes today, sprinkled through all three readings—as well as the psalm—are the ideas of sin and grace and salvation.

Numbers relays a chapter in the story of the wandering Israelites; they are weary of manna, the food of the angels, and begin complaining about their lot only to be stricken with an infestation of snakes. They pray for forgiveness, but the snakes don't go away. Instead, salvation—the anti venom, if you will, comes in the form of a bronze snake on a stick.

Then, in John's gospel, Jesus compares himself to the snake on the stick, proclaiming that like the bronze serpent, he too, must be raised up so that all who believe in him might be saved through him. Psalm 107 proclaims the Lord's salvation, and Paul writes the people of Ephesus telling them that it is only through grace that we are saved.

Salvation appears, over and over today. But what does it mean to be saved? Does it mean accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior? Does it mean saved from the fires of hell? We know we are only mortal, we know none of us will live on this plane and in these bodies forever, so what are we talking about when we talk about salvation, and sin, and grace?

As I shared with the group at Monday's bible study, my great uncle Spike, who attended the Zionist Church, believed he had reached sanctification and that it was no longer possible for him to sin. Now, I don't know about you, but I can hardly walk across the floor most mornings without sinning somehow. I'm not talking about murder here, just those pesky idiosyncratic sins that plague us all. I won't bore you with mine, except to say they can be distractions in my daily walk with God, demanding not only my time, but room in my already-cluttered mind.

So the idea of being unable to sin—of sin being an impossibility makes no sense to me. I think I understand the point behind what Uncle Spike was trying to say—that maybe when you've reached a point in your spiritual walk with God that 99% of the time you are doing right, and thinking right, and loving right, the chances of a really big sin

coming down the Pike are pretty slim. Still...impossible? Hardly. Especially in a man who shared much of the same genetic material as me.

We are each prone to sin; we all miss the marks in our life with God. Sometimes, we miss in big ways—we really screw up and the damage we cause affects not only our own souls, but leaves lasting marks on those around us as well; Collateral damage. Sometimes the nature of our sin is such that, as the psalmist says, we become afflicted unto death.

Have you ever known someone who is so filled with pain at what she's done she can barely breathe? Or who is so trapped in confusion and loss that he barely knows his own name, much less to whom he belongs? Or whose resentment and anger toward another is all consuming and is robbing her of life's joy?

This is sin. Sin is the fear, the guilt, the wrath, the wedge separating us from God and one another. And as much as we might like there to be nice and neat, black and white, salvation vs. damnation, clear cut delineations—between what is and isn't sin, they just don't exist. It's all messier and more human than that.

Often, we begin with the purest of intentions, pursuing righteousness, or justice, or love, or peace or meaning, only to find ourselves on the wrong side of the divide, further and further away from God and community than we might have ever imagined possible. At least that's the way it feels. The truth, of course, is that God is no further away than God ever was, and chances are, the isolation is self-imposed. And that's the really horrific thing about being off the rails—it feels as if you are utterly alone. Forsaken. Stuck in an endless cycle of pain from which there seems to be no escape.

And this is where Grace comes in.

God's grace is always ready, patiently waiting for us to exhaust ourselves and become so sick and tired of being sick and tired, that we relinquish our hold and sin relinquishes its hold on us. And we can collapse, and weep, and rest, safe in the arms of the Christ who has been following us all along like a parent follows a new toddler. We are saved; forgiven; redeemed. We are released from exile, reunited with neighbor and are one in God once more. Our lives are filled with meaning again and we know real peace, true love, and restorative justice.

Beyond any logical sense, God brings us back to ourselves time and time again.

You see, God, and only God, knows the full scope of the human soul. God alone knows the holy light that fills us because God placed it there, so for all our sinfulness—from the everyday missteps we all make, to the truly monstrous—God continues to love us. We don't earn the love, and we certainly don't deserve the love, but it is there nonetheless. And that, my friends, is pure grace.

It is grace that sparkles through our everyday lives manifesting as a smile, a beautiful sunset, kindnesses shown, laughter shared, and mercy extended. It is grace that always

emerges after the myriad catastrophes with which we are confronted; grace comes in the form of: comforting words, donations given, and hours of lives spent repairing the breach. And, it is grace that ever so lovingly stitches our ragged souls back together when we at last fall to our knees in despair and misery.

Yes, our fellow humans are often the vehicles through which God's grace is showered upon the world; and yes, grace also is realized through a changed insight, or a willingness to forgive, or an unexpected lightness when we realize a burden we've been carrying has been removed.

The incomparable Anne Lamott says this about grace:

It is unearned love--the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It's the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.

And, *Grace always bats last.*

God grant us all the ability to recognize the saving grace eternally offered, and give us the wisdom to receive it.

Amen.