

Sermon for First Presbyterian Church, Austin, Texas by Marjory Zoet Bankson

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It is my practice to use the lectionary because it links us with the worldwide church. Listen, remembering that Christians all over the world, Catholic and Protestant, are wrestling with the same text today.

OT Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9

Moses and the serpent-staff as a sign of God's presence

Watching the news of war in Iraq this week, it is not hard to imagine the scene in our Old Testament scripture for

today...sandstorms, sun glare and thirst, danger and despair. They remembered Egypt, with its cool shadows and plentiful water, and they wanted to go back, even if it meant slavery again.

In response to their complaining, God sent them a plague of poisonous snakes! When the Hebrews cried out for mercy, Moses was told to shape a bronze serpent and elevate it on a pole and the mere sight of it would cure their ills. His staff was a sign of God's nearness and healing...a way **thru** the wilderness. It is important to remember that God did not kill the snakes nor did God snatch them out of harm's way. Moses' staff was a sign of God's presence **with them in the wilderness.**

The snake is an ancient symbol for healing and new life. It sheds an old skin and emerges fully formed in a new one. The caduceus that marks the medical profession is a healing sign: two snakes entwined around a pole in a spiral. Military doctors wear that insignia on their collars and, before the days of rampant malpractice suits, we saw it on license plates too. It was a sign of help. For the Hebrews, the bronze snake on Moses' staff was a sign that God's help was close by.

Identifying with a wandering band of needy exiles may be hard for us. It is for me. I grew up a good Presbyterian— glad that we had faculty members from the local university as our choir director and organist, proud of the local civic leaders in our congregation, comfortable as part of “the establishment” in Bellingham, Washington—small potatoes, to be sure, but secure. We belonged to what Walter Breuggemann calls the “dominant consciousness.”

Now, as Christians in America, we find ourselves in the wilderness...surprised...disoriented by our dependence on God. It is not so much that we left Egypt on purpose, but it is that religious faith and church membership have become increasingly marginalized in our culture, as money became the measure of all things. The religious dream of a just nation that underlay Martin Luther King's rhetoric during the Civil Rights movement has been replaced by cynical power politics and the economics of exploitation. Individualism reigns supreme. Violence is seen as entertainment and the cool family on TV is "The Sopranos" instead of Ozzie and Harriet.

The world has changed and we are stranded in the desert with the strange image of Moses' staff to guide us during Lent. What hope is that in this troubled time?

Let us turn to the New Testament reading assigned for today.

Scripture: John 3: 14-21 ..."For God so loved the world..."

The Gospel of John links the crucifixion with Moses' staff by saying *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...* For the Gospel writer, Moses' staff becomes the cross of Jesus, a sign of suffering and deliverance, healing and new life.

The context for our New Testament lesson is Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus who was probably a good Presbyterian elder in his time. You remember the story. Nicodemus is an expert in church law who comes to Jesus at night, perhaps afraid to be seen talking with this strange teacher but courageous in his search for God. "What must I do to be saved?" he asks. Jesus replies, "You must be born again." "But what does that mean? How can a grown man be born again?"

The Gospel of John goes back to this image of Moses and the bronze serpent to describe what “born again” means. There is something, John says, about this symbol of suffering that will help us deal with the serpent stings that come with being in the wilderness. It is not about magic and it is not about eliminating the serpents. When we can trust God’s presence through dark days and sleepless nights, we will find healing and eternal life beginning here and now. **The cross is an invitation INTO the world, not a roadmap away from it.**

Many of us memorized John 3:16 in Sunday school, *For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son...* It was a lucky charm. Believe in Jesus and be saved, snatched from the jaws of death or whatever difficulty we could imagine. However, hearing this piece of scripture in the context of exile, of estrangement from the culture around us, can quicken its meaning-make it new again. This time we notice the first statement, *For God so loved the world...* Not that God hated the world and sent his son to fix it up, but that God loved the world and loves it still.

The image of Jesus on the cross is meant to be a reminder that God loves the whole world, not just particular parts or people. The cross is a reminder of transformation happening when we have run out of answers and do not know which way to turn. **It is a different kind of freedom than we imagined!**

John is saying that there is something about the image of Jesus on the cross that can give us hope in a time of despair, healing in a time of disease, new life at a time when old answers will not do any more. Surely, we live in such a time.

At the core, the cross is a sign that God's way is not like ours. We want victory, assurance, security. The cross is a reminder that we will walk in the desert, lonely and frightened, trusting in manna for the day and not much more. The cross is a threat and a promise, a reminder that God's way arises from the margins, from the meek and powerless, from the suffering and the faithful.

I am suspicious of people who see so sure that they know God's will and God's way, especially those who use this scripture passage to determine who's in and who's out of God's eternal realm.

These days, I often find myself quiet about being a Christian. I am embarrassed to be lumped with the so-called "moral majority" and so I keep silent about my faith, telling myself that I do not want to offend others. It has been hard for me, the wife of a Vietnam vet, to watch our rush toward war as if it were a video game. I feel like an exile from the dominant culture in our modest house, making plans for service in our community instead of retirement to a luxury condominium. Your feelings about being an exile will be different from mine, but we must begin there... far from power as Jesus was.

Here is a personal story about the way God works when we stay open to the mystery of conflict and suffering. 35 years ago, as my husband prepared to leave for his second tour of duty in Vietnam, we belonged to a church in Hanover, New Hampshire, that took its mission as a peacemaker seriously. Many members were actively involved in the anti-war movement, but the pastor preached regularly about **not** dehumanizing each other-**not** making each other into symbols of the war even as protesters gathered to plan in the basement.

The church commissioned Peter as a missioner of that congregation in Vietnam. One of the elders agreed to write to him, regularly report to the congregation about Peter's life, and work while he was there. They lifted that burden off my shoulders and gave me a safe place to wrestle with my own demons of fear and anger while he was gone.

Fortunately, Peter came back safely and we moved on from there. Then, in 1995, the husband of our [Faith@Work](#) copy editor went to Vietnam as an orthopedic surgeon with the Presbyterian Medical Benevolence Foundation. He later brought two Vietnamese doctors and a translator to the States for special training and he called to ask if we would host them for a visit to Washington, DC. We said we would.

While they were in our home, we discovered that one of them had been born in the same village where my husband had spent a year with two other Americans, a medic and a radio operator. What are the chances of that happening? It smelled like God to me!

"Come back to Vietnam," he said, "and we'll go back together."

Therefore, in 1996, we did that. We flew to Hanoi and then to Quang Ngai, the provincial capital. We spent ten days there, walking the ground, visiting hospitals and schools. On the last night, Dr. A invited us to his home for a final dinner. With 18 people around the table, talk finally turned to the war. "Where were you?" they asked Peter. "Right in Duc Pho, where your people used us for target practice before engaging American troops."

Then came the question we had wanted to ask Dr. A. "Where were you during the war?"

"About 30 miles away, in the mountains," he said, "digging bullets out of people with no lights and no water." The room was very still. No one breathed. Then he reached his hand across the table saying, "You and I are lucky to be alive. Let us build peace together."

Truly, it was the realm of God! Something we could not have imagined 30 years ago. I believe that when we can keep our eyes turned toward Jesus, we can taste the bread of eternal life here and now in moments like these.

Opening ourselves to suffering can also come in simple little ways, close to home.

Each night, I speak to my 89-year-old mother by phone. She lives in Colorado and I live in Washington, DC. I would rather not hear the loneliness in her life, so I am often hurried, distracted when we talk. I do not really want to know that diarrhea is draining the nutrition out of her body...like the babies in Iraq. Nevertheless, for me to glance at a crucifix that I have recently hung by the phone before I call her is to breathe deeply and open my heart. Remember that we are meeting in God's time, a kairos moment across the miles, so love can arise like manna for both of us. Sometimes it works and sometimes it does not, but I am learning to pray my way into it.

Suffering comes when we buy into a way of life that makes consumption a goal instead of human relationships. Suffering comes when we turn aside from hungry children and homeless

men. Suffering comes when we harden our hearts against the ills of the world. To be born again has something to do with softening our hearts and being satisfied by simple things, responding to suffering and speaking up for those who are being exploited.

Just before the hostilities started, I heard David Hilfiker report on his trip to Iraq. David is a doctor from the Church of the Saviour community where I worship and he had just returned from a fact-finding trip to Iraq. With a clear sense of burden, he described the human costs that our sanctions have produced. Infant mortality has increased in Iraq from 3% to 13% in the past 10 years. 5,000 babies die **each month**, mostly from impure water and malnutrition. That is 60,000 lives per year...more than the total American deaths in Vietnam. He acknowledged the power struggle with Iraq's leader, but came back to the infant mortality rate as a sign of OUR numbness and bondage. "What has happened to the soul of America?" David asked. "What kind of a country do we live in that we condone this kind of sacrifice from the weakest ones, from the children?"

The sad thing is that I think I know the answer. I think we live in a country that is numb to all but our own comfort. I think we are living in a spiritual wasteland, and that as a people of God, we need to recover our capacity to experience suffering...both our own and that of others.

As we walk through these dark days of Lent and war, each day will offer us the chance to turn our eyes toward the cross...and remember God's love FOR the world, which we are now responsible for living. I want to close with a poem that circulated widely on the internet. It was supposedly found on

the bedside table of Mother Teresa when she died:

People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people may accuse you of selfish motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you may win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

Honesty and openness make you vulnerable.

Be open anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People who really want help may attack you if you help them.

Help them anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you may get hurt.

Give your best anyway.

Amen.