

THE WAY TO THE PROMISED LAND
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Our readings from the lectionary today, if we relate the Old Testamentⁱ and New Testamentⁱⁱ lessons to each other, seem to be about a bronze serpent. In the book of Numbers we're told that the ancient Israelites, after the Exodus from Egypt, wander for forty years in the wilderness of the Sinai Desert, short of the promised land of Canaan.ⁱⁱⁱ They complain at least ten times to their leader, Moses,^{iv} impatient about the conditions they have to put up with. Today's reading relates the most rebellious episode, where they speak directly against God as well as Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water." In response to their affront, God sends poisonous serpents, and many die from snakebites. Then the people realize they've sinned and ask Moses to pray to God for them. In response, God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, so that people who are bitten by snakes can look upon it and live.

In the reading from the gospel of John, Jesus analogizes himself to the bronze serpent: "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." This becomes a bit strange to me when remembering that some five or six hundred years after Moses,^v the Israelite king Hezekiah destroys Moses' bronze serpent because it had become an object of worship. As is explained in the book of Second Kings: Hezekiah "did what was right in the sight of the Lord...He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it."^{vi} Of course, this also reminds us of Moses destroying the golden calf at the base of Mount Sinai, because the Israelites had made it into an idol which they were worshipping

and making offerings to.^{vii} So how can Jesus, who came to be called not just the Son of Man but also the Son of God, be analogized to a bronze serpent, which an Israelite king, faithful to God, destroys because it has become an object of idol worship?

For me to understand this, and to say anything meaningful to you, I have to pull way back from these descriptions of exalting of a bronze serpent and of Jesus by analogy. I need to ask myself, "What's the big picture of each of these passages?" In the case of Numbers, it's the story of the Exodus of the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt to liberation in the Promised Land. In the gospel of John, it's the story of how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus liberates each of us for lives of ultimate meaning. Let me spend a little time with you on each of these stories and then on how they relate to each other in showing us the way to the Promised Land or to salvation, in traditional Christian language.

The philosopher Michael Walzer, who will be coming to lecture at Stanford on April 24, wrote a book some thirty years ago entitled *Exodus and Revolution*.^{viii} In it he argued that the biblical story of the Exodus has become the paradigmatic theme of liberation in Western culture. It was evoked regularly during great revolutions like the American and the Russian, by Oliver Cromwell in the English Civil War, the Puritans in their emigration to America, the North American civil rights movement, and the South American liberation theology movement, among many other examples. Walzer is more interested in the pragmatic, this-worldly aspects than the miraculous, spiritual dimensions. As he writes, "The Israelites are not, after all, magically transported to the promised land...they must march to get there, and the march is full of difficulties, crises, struggles, all realistically presented, as if to invite human as well as divine resolution."^{ix}

He explains that, unlike cyclical versions of history and the natural world in many ancient myths, "The appeal of Exodus history to generations of radicals lies in its linearity, in the idea of a promised end, in the purposiveness of the Israelite march." He notes that this linearity works for personal change too. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, for example, is the tale of an individual "journey from the worldly city, through the wilderness of the world, to a place called Jerusalem... a tale of self-transformation."^x This is not an easy journey, either for social revolutionaries or for us individually in our self-transformation. We start enslaved. It's hard to break free from our oppression. Then, once we think we're out and on the way to the promised land, we actually find ourselves in the wilderness for a long time: suffering, complaining, backsliding, being rebuked and challenged to be better. We then have to fight our way into the Promised Land, and even when we're there it's not in fact all flowing with milk and honey. This is how it really happened in the American Revolution and in the civil rights movement, Walzer explains, as well as in many other social change and personal change experiences throughout Western history. But we can get liberated and are able to begin radically new lives.

The story of Jesus adds the dimension of messianism. Starting a couple of centuries before the birth of Jesus, in Judaism we begin to get apocalyptic end-time visions of a new heaven and a new earth. Now, "it is Paradise, not just the promised land... that lies just on the other side of the next-to-Last Days."^{xi} With the coming of the Messiah, we have the hope of being led into a perfect realm. The book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible describes how life will be perfected forever for the wise and righteous, who will shine like stars.^{xii} The book of Revelation in the New Testament describes a holy city, the new Jerusalem, where "nothing accursed will be found there anymore."^{xiii} Previously, even if the Exodus promises were completely fulfilled for the ancient Israelites, the result would still be a "community living in historical time, its citizens

farming the land, waiting for the rain, watching for foreign enemies, celebrating the seventh day [as the Sabbath]."^{xiv}

Even if you or I were to believe the possibility of either of these visions -- making our way to the Promised Land or to a perfect paradise -- there's a fundamental problem, at least for me, in the fact that some are included and some are excluded. Walzer reminds us that the reality of the conquest of the land of Canaan by the ancient Israelites was that "the Canaanites are explicitly excluded from the world of moral concern. According to the commandments of Deuteronomy, they are to be driven out or killed -- all of them, men women and children -- and their idols destroyed."^{xv} Columbia professor Edward Said, a Palestinian-American, produced what he called "a Canaanite reading" of Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*, making clear how troubling is "the injunction laid on the Jews by God to exterminate their opponents, an injunction that somewhat takes away the aura of progressive national liberation which Walzer is bent on giving to Exodus."^{xvi} Walzer tries to soften this critique by claiming that that historically "the conquest seems to have had in fact a very different character: more like a gradual infiltration than a systematic campaign of extermination." But he admits the biblical injunctions to kill the Canaanites are there. He goes on to ask, even from a modern secular perspective, "Is it a feature of revolutionary history that newly liberated and covenanted people should think about their enemies in this absolutist fashion?"^{xvii} I think the answer is that there are other ways to think about one's enemies, indeed to love them as Jesus asked, and as demonstrated by modern Moses like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

Today's lectionary passage from John also presents an exclusivism problem in the Messianic vision of Jesus for eternal life in paradise: God may have so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, but apparently those who do not believe in the only Son of God are

condemned to perish. That vision becomes even more graphic in the book of Revelation: "As for the ... faithless, the polluted...the sorcerers, the idolaters... their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur."^{xviii}

Biblical scholar Elaine Pagels was at Keplers last night, talking about her new book on Revelation, and she pointed out that there were other Messianic apocalyptic writings in the Christian world at the same time as the book of Revelation was produced which, by contrast, were universalist in their vision that all would achieve eternal salvation. One, for example, called "The Secret Revelation of John" includes this passage: "I said, 'Christ, will the souls of everyone live in the pure light?' He said to me, 'Those upon whom the Spirit of the life descends...they will be saved and become perfect. For the power enters into every human being - for without it, it is not possible to stand up-right. After it [the soul] is born, then the Spirit of Life is brought to it.'^{xix}

The big picture of Jesus for me, when you pull back from the proof texts for exclusivism, which you certainly can find, is that he came with a vision of unconditional love for all people. , Jesus figured out how to get five thousand people fed all at once -- most of whom probably didn't believe in him -- simply because they were hungry.^{xx} He broke through the bigotry of his time against lepers^{xxi} and women^{xxii} and foreigners like Samaritans^{xxiii} and Romans,^{xxiv} who weren't of his own religious background. Jesus was the good shepherd who was as concerned as much for the lost sheep as the one that stays within the flock.^{xxv} He asked us not to judge others, lest we be judged ourselves.^{xxvi} In everything he asked us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.^{xxvii}

So, what, in the end, is there to say about the bronze serpent? It seems to have been a symbol of mercy, allegedly curing people who were bitten by snakes for over 500 years until it

was destroyed by King Hezekiah as an idol. But it's also a symbol of the difficulties of the Exodus experience for us both as groups of people and as individuals. We need to work long and hard, surrounded by snakes, for liberation and for personal transformation, but the Promised Land can actually be reached. Moses' lifting up the bronze serpent can also be analogized to the lifting up of Jesus to the cross and beyond as the all-loving exemplar, even to the extent of his asking God, as he dies, to forgive those who, far from believing in him, tortured and crucified him.^{xxviii} What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul!^{xxix}

BENEDICTION

If here you have found liberation, take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort, go and share it with others.

If you have dreamed dreams, help one another, that they may come true!

If you have known love, give some back to a bruised and hurting world.

Go in peace. Amen

Lauralyn Bellamy

NOTES

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- i Numbers 21: 4-9.
- ii John 3: 14-21.
- iii Numbers 14:33.
- iv Numbers 14:22
- v *Jerome Biblical Commentary* pp. 47, 205.
- vi 2 Kings 18:4.
- vii See Exodus 32.
- viii Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
- ix Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 10.
- x *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- xi *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.
- xii Daniel 12:3.
- xiii Revelation 21:1-2; 22:3.
- xiv Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 120.
- xv *Ibid.*, p. 142. See Deut. 20:17-18.
- xvi Edward W. Said, "Michael Walzer's 'Exodus and Revolution': A Canaanite Reading", *Grand Street*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter, 1996), p. 91.
- xvii Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 149.
- xviii Revelation 21:8.
- xix Elaine Pagels, Handout at book event at Keplers in Menlo Park, California, on March 17, 2012. See her new book entitled *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012).
- xx Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13.
- xxi Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16.
- xxii Luke 8:1-3.
- xxiii Luke 10:25-37.
- xxiv Matthew 8:1-4.
- xxv John 10: 11-18.
- xxvi Mark 7:1; Luke 6:37.
- xxvii Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31.
- xxviii Luke 23:34.
- xxix "What Wondrous Love Is This," an anonymous folk hymn first published in Mercer's *Cluster*, 1836.