

LOOK AND LIVE

(Numbers 21.4-9; Psalm 107.1-3, 17-22; John 3.14-21)

I count it a genuine pleasure to return to this pulpit after many years. Let me begin by offering my heartfelt gratitude to Dean Shaw for gracious hospitality. Congratulations on your appointment as Dean for Religious Life! I pray that you and Stanford University have a long and fruitful time together!

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From the book of Numbers: "And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

From the Gospel of John: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..."

+Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The joy of newfound liberation had worn off and life in the wilderness was getting old. God's people could no longer remember the sound of Miriam's tambourine or the sight of her dance. They grew tired of the manna and the quails sent from heaven and angry that they had not yet found the Promised Land. On account of their ingratitude God sent poisonous snakes to bite them and some of them perished. They repented and begged Moses to save them and Moses followed God's command to fashion a bronze image of the snake that bit them. Those who fixed their eyes on the bronze serpent were healed and lived.

The story of Moses lifting the bronze serpent in the wilderness sounds odd to modern ears. It contains a mixture of lived experience and cultural myth. Yet, the practice of sympathetic magic, of manipulating a symbol of the very thing that did you harm in order to heal was commonly known in the ancient world. While this miraculous tale of people being cured of a deadly snakebite by gazing at a bronze may strain credulity, some aspects of this story make perfect sense to this snake loving clergy person.

Horned vipers make their home in the desert. This side-winding snake, between two and three feet long when fully grown, stuns and digests its food with a potent poison, a drop or two of which can cause excruciating pain, paralysis, and possibly death in a human being. But this timid creature has no use for humans whatsoever. Its days are spent hiding from predators and the desert sun. If a gecko or some other culinary delight should happen to wander by, the creature springs into action, dines quickly, and then returns to its hiding place. It would rather slither sideways away from something so large as a person than attack—that is, unless a group of travellers should happen to go tromping through its natural

habitat so engrossed in their own plight they fail to watch where their feet happen to land.

“Mind the serpents,” was a fitting warning for the children of Israel as they gazed on the bronze image of the thing very that, in that instance, frightened them the most. I believe that when the children of Israel beheld that bronze serpent, they asked themselves the hard questions: Who are we? How did we get here? Why are we still here? What kind of people are we called to be?

A fiery serpent, or seraph, lifted up high is a rich and multivalent symbol of mindfulness, of warning, and of healing and wholeness when the onlooker dared to behold what she would rather ignore.

Indeed the writer of John’s Gospel understood it, in retrospect, as a fitting symbol for the kind of death Jesus was to suffer. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,” he wrote, “so also must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

The serpent, I believe, with its terrible sting, has less to do with the body of Jesus than with the cross on which he was crucified. Romans reserved crucifixion for slaves and for the worst enemies of the state. But for those living under Roman occupation, the cross was a symbol of terror.

What is most terrifying about this symbol is that it represents the potential depth of inhumanity. When generations not so far removed as we from that first Good Friday beheld the cross, they felt the sting of its poison, a reminder of cruel inhumanity whose venom could infect one generation after another with hatred and strife. Even to this very day, when we wish to describe the worst pain we can possibly imagine, we invoke the cross and say that our suffering is excruciating.

Yet the first century writer, like Moses in the wilderness, directed the eyes of his readers, and our eyes, to behold the very thing that any sensible person would ignore, a most unpleasant truth, a frightening dimension of reality, what may sting, paralyze, and threaten death. The cross undermines the most comfortable narratives about the world that we know and our own place in it. That symbol of the human one, fearfully and wonderfully made, yet lifted high above the earth is at once a warning, a call to mindfulness, and the occasion for healing and wholeness.

Anticipating and attending to the cross in the middle of our Lenten wilderness, as the children of Israel attended to the bronze serpent, causes us to pause and reflect on those things we would rather ignore about our world. Yet in so doing we are not condemned to death. Instead we hear the invitation to open our hearts, exchange inhumanity for authentic humanity, nourished by God’s never-failing grace and radically transforming love that even the tomb cannot contain. Eyeing the cross in the distance remind us that though we have made progress on our journeys, we have not yet reached the promise land.

On 4 November 2008 in Chicago, a city whose news cycle is filled with stories of the violence that dogs the days and nights of the urban poor, I walked through Grant Park warmed by a misdirected Southern breeze that brought unseasonable warmth to a winter night. In front of me was a slender, young African American man, probably no more than 20, hoisting an American flag on a pole nearly as tall as he, waving it slowly and deliberately in the summerlike breeze. It seemed the whole nation came together that night, some even setting aside their disappointment in the

outcome of the presidential election momentarily to bask in a symbol of a newfound possibility—that we had somehow managed as a nation to put a shameful past behind us and envision a new future together. Some even declared prematurely that we had become a post-racial society. (Remember that?) I will carry with me for the rest of my days that image of my proud, flag-bearing young brother. That young man, born a suspect in his own country, celebrated in that moment his full citizenship.

Six years later I beheld another image I will never forget. A half-day's drive from my home in Chicago, in a little town in Missouri, sat a sniper perched atop an armored personnel carrier, his gun trained on peaceful protesters in mourning. That image thrust me back to a day in my childhood in Cleveland, Ohio when my older sister and brother ran to the window and pointed with glee, "Look Mommy, Army men!" Mother replied with a sullen look "No, dear heart, that is the National Guard."

I was too young to know that there were fires burning nearby, but I do recall that strange mix of hope and pride that we were well on our way to having a new mayor, a Negro, just like us, while at the same time there was some mysterious war being waged in the angry streets on account of people like us.

Many things have changed since those days. Too few things have change for far too many. Lent is a reminder for Christians that we still live in the wilderness. Lent is an intentional, temporal wilderness where we look squarely toward the cross—at the potential depth of inhumanity—and dare to ask the hard questions: Who are we? How did we get here? Why are we still here? What kind of people are we called to be?

We may grow weary of looking at the carnage. Look anyway—and live. Risk exchanging inhumanity for authentic humanity, where compassion trumps ambition, understanding tribal loyalty, and charity trumps cupidity.

There is another image of citizenship that I love to see, and it is right here. On this warm spring day, we share with the earliest disciples what even the cross could not destroy—an invitation to a sacred meal that marks us as full citizens of the reign of God. For, this moment we will feed each other across all divisions. Long after the cross of Christ was dismantled the disciples gathered at the table in love and fellowship. We, too, gather here. May this symbol of our citizenship of the reign of God give you courage when you leave this place to behold the cross whenever it may appear. May it also give you courage to keep that conversation going Make common cause with your brothers and sisters, trading inhumanity for authentic humanity.

Don't turn yours eyes away from the cross. Look and live. And let us ask ourselves as a people—because this is never an individual question: Who are we? How did we get here? Why are we still here? Who are we called to be?