

Scripture Reading:

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

**Love From the Ashes**

You might be wondering why is this obscure passage from Numbers is even in the lectionary today and more than that why did Karen bother to have us read it? How is it at all relevant next to the most well know verse in all the bible? Well, it's because a reflection on this text is actually in our gospel reading today as well. In our reading from John when Jesus was asked to explain himself to Nicodemus, who had come to him at night (in John that always means a place of misunderstanding), Jesus 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." And then follows the famous, "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" (John 3: 14-16). Jesus actually refers to this story in numbers two other times in the Gospel of John. Like the serpent on the pole, he must be "lifted up" so all who look will finally see who he really is (John 8:28) and so all people will come to him (John 12:32).

Doug Goodwin wrote "The Gospel of John knows that in order to confront Jesus—the real Jesus, especially the crucified Jesus—you have to know this story. At the very least, we remember this story because without remembering it we forget something very important about our Lord . . . and the church is rife with examples of problems that occur because something of Jesus has been forgotten."

So, linger in the story a while. Recognize the complaining, the impatience or, (it might be translated), the short-temperedness. Notice the fear. Notice how blessed, heavenly manna is now "miserable food." Notice how on the road to the Promised Land the journey feels too long, too scary, too unpalatable.

Wonder at the depiction of God sending poisonous snakes and our compulsion to rush in defence of God ("surely God did not send poisonous snakes!"). Marvel at the insight of the people that turned them to confession rather than blame of others or self-pity or fatalism.

Finally, the "lifting up" that somehow brings life—of the serpent on a pole; of Jesus on a cross; of Jesus into heaven (Acts 1:9); of the lowly (Luke 1:52) . . . maybe even of yourself.

Then pray, in words something like:

We lift our voices in grateful praise, O God, for you have lifted up our Lord, Jesus Christ, so that when we fix our gaze upon him we mysteriously and miraculously find healing, saving, and life itself overtaking us."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Goodwin, Doug (lenten daily devotional University Hill Congregation)

What stood out for me was that as the people faced the serpent, as they lifted it up, they faced and lifted up their greatest fears and in doing that they discovered their greatest sins. Which brought them straight to a vulnerable, honest repentance. What if we were willing to do that in our life and faith. Rather than grumbling like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, rather than complaining about all that God has given us. We stopped and looked at what it is we are afraid of, what it is that we are blaming and step into the abundance Jesus came to offer all the world. Which takes us back to everyone favourite Bible verse. Or at least the best known one. I wonder if people really took time to connect with that verse, and place it within the passage it is written, if it would be so popular. In fact I am pretty sure it would not be. You see in this passage Jesus states what Luther called “the Gospel in a nutshell” And that gospel is that God is a God of love, “ that love is the logic by which the kingdom of God runs, and that God’s love trumps everything else, even justice, in the end.”<sup>2</sup>

Now we know many do not read it that way. Rather it is read that God loves those who believe in a certain way- isn’t that what it says after-all? Perhaps those who don’t believe the way we think they should believe won’t get eternal life like we will. That is the way it is most commonly translated. Yet, ever since I was a child and I memorized verse 17 alongside verse 16 I knew there was more to God than condemnation. In fact Jesus says “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Period. Moreover, the “judgment” to come is not punishment but simply the crisis that befalls those who will not come out of the darkness for fear of the light. It is not judgment as punishment, but judgment as crisis, as tragedy, as loss. Judgment in reality that we place on ourselves when we fail to recognize God with us. God comes in love to redeem such loss, turn such tragedy into victory, and demonstrate true power through sheer vulnerability and sacrifice.

Just like those grumbling in the wilderness are offered the opportunity to notice that God is raining manna down on them, they are being nourished in the dessert and yet they cannot see the light. The serpents coming to them made them repent of their complaining. Suddenly they realized that all we are doing is judging and complaining, in the meantime we are missing out on our freedom, we are failing to notice that even in the midst of this journey God is providing for us. How often are we called to confront our very selves? When we come to the light, when we come face to face, open to God’s love that is what we will see.

“Which is the first reason we might not name this as our favourite verse if we gave it any real thought, as our world – and quite often our lives – operate according to the more traditional belief that security comes not through vulnerability and sacrifice but through power and might. ... For we live in a world that seeks security not only through power but also through wealth and consumption, and we are taught from a very early age to avoid true vulnerability – and the truly vulnerable – at all costs. So, sacrifice? Sure, when we can afford to. Love our enemies? Maybe if everything else is taken care of first. Vulnerability? Only if there is no other choice.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/lent-4-b/>

The kind of self-sacrificing love Jesus offers is frightening to such a world. No wonder some run and hide, as it requires us to trust nothing other than God. And most of us find it impossible to embrace Jesus' example...except when we ourselves have been brought low by illness, or loss, or a broken relationship, or disappointed hopes or some other way by which the world taught us that no matter how hard we try, no matter what position we may achieve, no matter how much money we may save, yet we cannot secure our destiny or save our lives. Only God can do that. Only love can do that. And it's frightening to be so utterly dependent on God."<sup>3</sup>

Another reason this might not be the favourite verse of many who hold onto what they believe is the truth is, if God is truly about love first and foremost than that is also what we are called to. That does not fit with our judgmental world and often our judgmental faith. A couple weeks ago I had a morning talk show on in the background while I was attempting to clean up the house. I stopped short for a portion of the conversation. Apparently Russell Wilson of the Seattle Seahawks tweeted "Thanks for the early showing of #50ShadesOfGrey late last night.." Now that was not the shocking part. The conversation lead in a direction that disturbed me. You see Russell Wilson claims to be a devout Christian. And so of course some are his fans because of this claim. However he began to receive responses like "How can you say you are a Christian and watch that moral filth?" and "Don't say you represent Christ, and then publicly endorse a movie filled with immorality and sexual violence." and "I'm more than a little confused, Russell. I thought you professed to be a Christian. And yes, I'm judgmental (John 7:24)." Just to reference that verse is "Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly."

I found myself only having a second to ponder my opinion, thinking both it's really none of our business and you know Russell maybe you just shouldn't have tweeted about watching the movie before I heard one of the talk show hosts say "I just don't understand Christians, why are they always so freaking judgemental of everyone and everything, doesn't the bible say it's up to God to judge." BAM - that hit me like any football tackle Russell Wilson has ever faced. Why? Because she said it in front of an audience of hundreds and to a larger world audience of likely millions, and because the truth hurts like a knife through the heart sometimes. I looked up this story About Wilson while preparing for this sermon and this was one of the response tweets "Oh those judgmental Christians. What next? Burning people alive in cages?" Mahatma Gandhi is said to have stated "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

My heart has been aching about this ever since I saw that 5 minute segment on that well known T.V. talk show. I am not aching because Wilson watched the movie but because I too am weary of the judgmentalism I see in our faith - across the board. Not just from the evangelicals whom we as progressive mainline Christians are quick to blame for all the faults of faith, but throughout all of Christianity even in the United Church. When will we discover that we follow Jesus who embraced all, who came to show us a God of unconditional love?

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<sup>3</sup> IBID

Alexie Torres-Fleming was one of the speakers at the C21 conference in January. Fleming grew up as a hispanic child in the slums of the bronx. “Growing up in the Bronx, Alexie Torres-Fleming watched her borough burn. As a little girl perched on the ledge of her ninth floor window in the Bronx River Public Housing Projects, she witnessed the fires that led to the devastation of the South Bronx in the late 1960s and 1970s. Although she was too young to understand things like “planned shrinkage,” “urban renewal,” “disinvestment” and “white flight,” she knew that it was a frightening and tumultuous time for her and all of the children of the South Bronx. When later urban planning initiatives transformed the rubble of her neighbourhood, Torres-Fleming grew determined to see that local residents had a role in the rebuilding process.”<sup>4</sup>

Fleming reflected on what it was like to be a child that the missionaries would come in to save. She stated “the church has largely been on the wrong side of history...we step in judging folks - step in telling them they are sinful” rather than beginning with love, grace and welcome. (That is our Canadian history with First Nations Peoples) Rather than letting people know how loved they are, how worthy they are, how much potential they have we enter with judgment. She recalls having Vacation Bible Schools come and teach them “Don’t have sex and don’t do drugs.” What she remembers is being told how broken and weak and unworthy she was. She says people focus on brokenness as if it is all we have, as if its not a systemic problem. She went on to challenge us all that “our charity is a poor substitute for justice denied.” She asked us to risk radical friendship and relationship with those we see as lesser than.

Fleming“founded Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (YMPJ) in 1994 with the mission to prepare young people to become prophetic voices for peace and justice. Faith is a central component of YMPJ’s work. Torres-Fleming and members of the organization encourage young people to believe that a desire to promote justice and healthy community growth is at the core of an individual’s belief, and that faith gives people the will and the courage to stand up and do something.

Torres-Fleming believes that convincing residents of the Bronx that they possess the skills and tools necessary to engender change is as important a legacy as the concrete results that YMPJ has produced. She is proud of the successful projects that have added parks, provided access to the Bronx River, and cleaned up brownfields, but she notes that it is “even more important that I contribute to leaving a legacy of a community that understands its own power.”<sup>5</sup> We are called to love first. We are called to lift one another up, to assist one another in rising from the ashes. When we love as we are loved we are living our faith.

Danny Cortez stated “The goal of our faith is not marriage equality, not religious freedom, the goal of our faith is to love well.”

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<sup>4</sup> <http://sojo.net/biography/alexie-torres-fleming>

<sup>5</sup> IBID

David Lose shared an inspiring story connected to these scriptures. “Years ago I preached a sermon about the offensive nature of God’s grace, suggesting that we might add four words to the end of our service of baptism, saying, “Child of God, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...like it or not.” A few weeks later, a friend shared a bedtime encounter he’d had with his then six-year-old son. Upset that his father was putting him to bed earlier than he wanted to go, Benjamin said, “Daddy, I hate you.” Benjamin’s father, exercising the kind of parental wisdom I hope for, replied, “Ben, I’m sorry you feel that way, but I love you.” Benjamin’s response to such gracious words surprised his dad: “Don’t say that!” “I’m sorry Benjamin, but it’s true. I love you.” “Don’t,” his son protested, “Don’t say that again!” At which point Ben’s father, remembering the words of the sermon, said, “Benjamin, I love you...like it or not!”

Why was Benjamin protesting his father’s love? Because he realized he could not control his father’s love and twist it to his advantage. Indeed, in the face of such love there is no bargaining and, ultimately, no control whatsoever. If his dad had said that if he ate all his vegetables he could stay up, or agreed that Ben could stay up later this night if he went to bed earlier the next, then Benjamin would have been a player, he would have exercised some measure of control over the situation and, indeed, over his dad. But in the face of unconditional love we are powerless. Yes, perhaps we can choose to accept it or not, perhaps we can run away from it, but we cannot influence it, manipulate it, or control it. In the face of this kind of love, we are powerless. And only when we’ve died to all of our delusions of actually being in control do we realize that such loss of perceived freedom and power is actually life.

God’s love, you see, is tenacious. And so God’s love will continue to chase after us, seeking to hold onto us and redeem us all the days of our lives, whether we like it or not.”<sup>6</sup>

True, unconditional, never-ending love is like that. May we seek to live and offer that kind of love to all the world too. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Lose, David