

HOLY CROSS DAY

September 14, 2008

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Numbers 21:4b-9

Psalm 98:1-5

I Corinthians 1:18-24

John 3:13-17

Keeping in Focus

I have to begin today with an apology to you all. When I was here on August 3rd, I remember a gentleman asked me what I planned to change should I be called as your pastor at Abiding Peace. I replied that, in all honesty, I'd have to wait until I was on the ground to truthfully answer that question. And now, here we are about five weeks later, my first day here, and I've gone and changed something already!

I'm sure you noticed that in today's service I requested that the Old Testament lesson be read, in addition to today's Gospel lesson. That's because I find it nearly impossible to discuss today's Gospel lesson without reading the lesson from Numbers. Jesus referenced this reading in his response to Nicodemus in the Gospel of John, so it would be best if we start there today.

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This story from Numbers has got to be one of the strangest stories in the Old Testament. You're familiar with the story of how the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after their exodus from Egypt. The constant refrain of the people during their wilderness time was to complain, and they complained about

everything. So by the time we get to the part of the story told in today's Old Testament lesson, both God AND Moses are used to hearing it. But *this* particular time the people cross the line. No longer are they just complaining about food and water. They're not just complaining about Moses and Aaron's leadership. This time they complained against God Himself. It is for *this* reason that God sent the plague of serpents against the people – because the people dared complain against God, and for this they incurred God's wrath.

And yet, when the people confessed their sin and asked Moses to intercede on their behalf, *God was gracious to them*. God accepted their confession and brought them salvation, also in the form of a serpent. But this time, the serpent would bring life. All those who looked upon the bronze serpent that Moses put upon the pole would be healed, and would live. And so it is that a thing that once caused the people death was transformed by God's power into a thing that brought life. Where once the serpents' bite would have meant certain death, God's bronze serpent would bring healing.

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So why do we have this strange story appointed for reading on Holy Cross Day? Well, for one it's because Jesus makes significant mention of this story from Numbers in today's Gospel reading. Jesus assumed that Nicodemus would know

this story, and need only mention it to make his point. Likewise, the Gospel writer assumed that his readers would know the story, and he need only make mention of it for us to understand his meaning.

But more importantly, there is the obvious parallel between this bronze serpent which brings healing being raised up on a pole, and Jesus being lifted up on the cross. So let's take a little time to examine what the cross meant in Jesus' day.

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In Jesus' day, execution by crucifixion was reserved for only the worst criminals in society. It was a common means of execution in the Roman Empire, but it was reserved only for slaves or foreigners; no Roman citizen would have been sentenced to die by crucifixion because it was considered too agonizing a death for a Roman. What's more, crucifixion was considered to be the most shameful death a person could die.

We all know what happened. In the days immediately following Jesus' execution, even the disciples hid in fear. They thought their Jesus movement was over. Jesus had been put to death, in the most painful and disgraceful way possible. Who would want to join a movement whose leader was put to death as a common criminal?

But then the miraculous happened. Jesus rose from the dead. In his glorious

resurrection, the grip of sin and death on humanity was broken. In his resurrection, Jesus transformed the cross from a symbol of oppression and death, to the ultimate symbol of hope, triumph and life.

And so, on this Holy Cross Day, our challenge is to meditate on the paradox that is the cross of Christ, how this thing that, to the Romans, was a sign of repression, persecution, and execution, became to Christians the sign of the ultimate triumph of God in Christ Jesus over the powers of sin and death.

One of the best stories I know to illustrate this paradox, and illustrate the powerful witness of Christians to the ultimate triumph of the cross of Christ, is a story of real Christians from the late 16th century. The story begins in January of 1597 in Kyoto, then the capital city of Japan. Tensions between the government and Christian missionary groups had been on the rise for several years. The rulers of Japan feared that missionary work was a precursor to a colonial invasion. In an attempt to stem the rising tide of Christianity in Japan, twenty-six Christian men, ranging in age from 12 to 53, were ordered executed. They were ordered to death by crucifixion.

These twenty-six men were forcibly marched, hands tightly bound behind their backs, from Kyoto to Nagasaki. The journey took a month. Despite the cold of winter and being tortured, the martyrs preached the Gospel all the way, to anyone

who would listen.

Finally they reached the place appointed for their execution, a high hill overlooking Nagasaki Bay. A nobleman tried to get the littlest martyr, twelve-year-old Louis Ibaraki, to renounce his faith and live. In response, Louis eagerly asked, “Where is my cross?” When the executioners pointed to the smallest cross, he immediately ran over, embraced it, and held onto it as if it were his favorite toy.¹

Since I first heard this story, I have been amazed at the faith of this little boy. Even those who were with Louis were amazed at him. On the eve of their execution, Louis’ fellow martyr Francis Blanco wrote, “We have little Louis with us, and he is so full of courage, and in such high spirits, that it astonished everybody.”

Surely Saint Louis Ibaraki understood the powerful transformative power of God. When he clung onto his own cross of crucifixion, Louis understood that on the other side of death stood his saviour Jesus waiting to embrace him with open arms. Louis understood that for him, the cross meant life eternal. When I think of Saint Louis Ibaraki I am always reminded of Jesus’ teaching that in order to enter the kingdom of God we must become like little children. This little child certainly grasped the meaning of the cross in his own life.

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When I last spoke to you on August 3rd, I urged you to keep your focus on carrying out God’s mission through the ministries of this congregation. I told you that when you are truly living out God’s call for your lives, God would prosper your efforts. All of these things are, of course, rooted in the cross of Christ – what God has done for us, so that we might be freed from the power of sin and death to live as God’s witness in the world.

And so today, I urge you to keep your eyes focused on that cross. Writer Elizabeth O’Connor said it this way:

We are not called primarily to create new structures for the church in this age, we are not called primarily to a program of service, or to dream dreams or visions. We are called first of all to belong to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and to keep our lives warmed at the hearth of his life. It is there the fire will be lit which will create new structures and programs of service that will draw others into the church to discern and have visions.²

May it be so. Amen.

<1,365 words>

¹ Sigfried Schneider. The 26 Martyrs of Japan (Chuo Press, 1980), p. 16.

² Elizabeth O’Connor. Called to Commitment (Harper & Row, 1963), p. 94.