

The God Who Won't Let Go (IV): Rescue the Perishing

A sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: John 3:14-21

I have a recurring dream—a nightmare really---in which I'm walking in a grassy meadow out in the country on a lovely Spring day. I feel lighthearted and taking in all the surroundings when suddenly something causes me to glance down. There in the middle of the path is a coiled rattlesnake. I freeze instantly, and start to pull back ver-r-r-ry slowly. But then I see another one, and another. It turns out the ground is covered with rattlesnakes, menacing, ready to strike.

Maybe there is some deep psychological meaning behind that dream. Or maybe it simply reflects a recent Harris poll on "What We Are Afraid Of" which discovered that 36% of all adults in the United States list snakes as their number one fear. The morning gospel reading uses snake imagery to say something about Jesus; a reference which acknowledges both fear and deliverance—deadly poison and its life-giving antidote. The reference recalls an incident from the desert wanderings of the Israelite people after liberation from slavery in Egypt. Those years without a homeland are characterized by the people's complaints – they don't have enough food, they don't like the food, things were better back in Egypt, what's the matter with the leadership---remember, these people are the Church's spiritual forebears! Well. While God graciously responds to their complaints, giving them water from a rock, quail for protein and manna for

their sweet tooth, they remain critical and rebellious, finally calling not only for Moses' overthrow, but God's. Coincidentally (or not!) at that moment venomous snakes crawl out of the rocks and start biting the complainers right and left. Suddenly repentant, the people beg Moses to intercede for them with God. The answer to their prayer is for Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and set it on a pole in the middle of camp. The snake-bitten were to gaze upon it and be restored. As odd and problematic as the story is, it makes a point: the thing which kills also cures; salvation springs from suffering. (A similar association is made in Greek mythology with Asclepius, the healing deity whose staff entwined with a serpent has been adopted in America as a symbol of the medical arts.)

If nothing else, this story—and the gospel reading--- suggest a particular posture as we deal with the fears and toxic conditions of the world we inhabit today. Look *up*—and behold the Source of our healing and life. A reading from the gospel according to John, in the third chapter at the 14th verse. Listen for God's Word!
[JOHN 3:14-21]

For God so loved the world. . . . We know these words by heart; they are the essence of the Christian gospel. Divine love is the impetus behind all the covenants God made with the people, and the motivation behind God's active involvement in human history. If that's the truth, then why does the text dwell on this division between the people of light and darkness, those who "believe in him," and will not perish, and those who don't and presumably will perish? Is the good news

really about God's love for the whole world, or is it reserved for those who have faith?

Our response to these questions grows out of our understanding of Jesus' death on the cross. The gospel writer presents the crucifixion as a necessity for human salvation. *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. . . .* Why was it necessary? One theory which has dominated much Christian theology says that in God's perfection, sin can be forgiven and its deadly effects countered only by blood sacrifice. God gave the Son to be that perfect sacrifice. But if we think of Jesus' death as a sacrifice demanded by God to somehow balance the scales between good and evil---does this seem like an offering of love or an act of appeasing divine wrath? God giving the Son for that purpose might even be considered divine child abuse!

But that view flies in the face of everything we know about God, and how God has so loved the world. There's God creating and calling it all "very good." There's God reaching out with an unconditional promise: *I will be your God, and you will be my people.* There's God hearing the cries of those people in slavery and liberating them, gifting them with a law and a land. There's God giving the Son who taught with wisdom, healed with compassion, and welcomed the outcast, stranger and sinner. Instead of seeing Jesus' death as payment to God for humanity's sin, let us reverse the direction and see it as God's self-giving sacrifice that brings us life. Then we can understand Jesus' crucifixion as redemptive suffering he chose in order to absorb all the venom of violence, self-

centeredness and self-pity; in short, to bear the sins of humanity without retaliation or blame or self-justification. Jesus gave himself to break the downward spiral of never-ending sin and guilt and death. He poured out his life into our life, overcoming death with life, poverty with abundance, debt with grace. *[Sally A. Brown, Cross Talk: Preaching Redemption Here and Now. Westminster John Knox Press, 2008]*

The scope of this love is as wide as the world; it cannot be limited or confined to just one group, even the one called “believers.” The church has tried to do this at times, thinking it is faithful to biblical testimony such as the text here in which John persists in dividing the world into light and darkness. The evidence seems persuasive: simply look around and see that many people prefer the condemnation darkness brings over the life-giving light of Christ. But when we settle for that judgment, the Church actually accepts a premise that the cross shatters—which is that God’s desire for the salvation of the entire world is thwarted by human failure and our inclination toward evil. Friends, God is greater than this! God’s love is stronger than the brokenness and hatred of the created order. God sent the Son not to condemn, but to save. God gave the Son not to suffer in punishment for our sins, but to labor in that suffering to renew life and meaning and hope. The cross is sign of the power of God to make all things new—a power we can acknowledge or ignore, but from which we cannot ultimately remain apart, on the outside, perishing. God gave for the Son as a gracious gift for our healing and life!

The Church proclaims this every time we gather at the Lord's table, to eat this bread and drink from the cup. We remember Jesus' suffering and death as "the new covenant in [his] blood" (*Luke 22:20*). It is the covenant established—as the other ones were established—through God's boundless love and self-giving grace.

In preparing this sermon I learned that the Greek word translated "judgment" in this text is *krisis*, from which our word "crisis" is derived. [*David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2. Westminster John Knox Press*] The new covenant brings us to a crossroads, an opportune time, a decision for light or darkness. To reduce that crisis as a choice for one's eternal destination misses the point. Jesus died for our sins—and defanged their power to hurt and destroy once and for all. We don't have to be afraid anymore. We don't have to accept violence and selfishness as inevitable outcomes of the human condition. We can choose the light. We can do what is true and good, moving beyond our self-centeredness into an awareness of our connection to others, beloved by God, just as we are. We can serve freely and give generously because we trust God's unconditional love, sealed in the new covenant. We can live with joy and purpose throughout this precious, time-bounded earthly journey and rest in the promise that it provides only a foretaste of what is yet ahead.

Friends, the cross serves as a corrective to our amazing capacity to deny reality. In the covenant made in Christ's blood, we come to see how terribly skewed our lives and communities are from God's

intent for them, and our need for rescue. We cannot see the goodness of creation or contemplate the divine image stamped upon each human heart without noticing the nightmare of coiled snakes --- violence and warfare, poverty and greed, disease and hatred, waste and pollution—hissing and threatening. Our own suffering is there, too: our personal disappointments, grief, pain, and anxiety about what will strike next. Finally there is no division between the people of the light and those of darkness. We are one people. We too are among the perishing.

According to an early version of the Legend of the Holy Grail, the miraculous chalice from which Jesus and the disciples drank at the Last Supper belongs to the one who asked the guardian of the vessel a single question: *What are you going through?* For God so loved the world that God knows what we are going through, what we need, and what will save us. And for that, for us, God gave the Son. From the One who drank the cup of suffering comes a cup of blessing which sustains us for all we are going through, for all we will ever go through. Lift up your eyes to the cross, and by God's grace, see your salvation. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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