



SAINT LUKE'S

LENT 4
YEAR B

NUMBERS 21:4-9
EPHESIANS 2:1-10
JOHN 3:14-21
PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

MARCH 11, 2018

“And 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.” –John 3:14-15

In his short story, “Death and the Compass”, Jorge Luis Borges relies heavily on an ancient Greek paradox, Zeno’s Dichotomy, to bring his tale to a dramatic close. The hero, Detective Erik Lönnrot, seeks to solve a complex set of murders placed geographically around the city in a pattern based on the ancient Hebrew four-letter name of God. Three crimes are committed, and the fourth left for the detective to anticipate, unaware that the criminal is banking on the detective’s intuition to draw him into an ambush. Shortly before the detective is killed by his arch nemesis, he goads the criminal for creating too complex a trap: “In your labyrinth there are three lines too many,” he said at last. “I know of a Greek labyrinth which is a single straight line...”. The paradox Borges references here begins with a simple premise: To walk to the end of a path, you must first walk halfway there; to walk halfway there, you must walk a quarter of the way there. But if every distance is able to be divided in half, how do you ever reach your end goal?

Paradox.

They abound in the teachings of Jesus:

“Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you...” (Matthew 11: 28)

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and

dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

“...and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave...” (Matthew 20:27)

In his late night discourse with Nicodemus the Pharisee, Jesus presents him with another paradox as he draws an explicit parallel between his salvific work and the narrative of Moses and the Bronze serpent. His efforts to cast himself as a fulfillment of the type set by Moses’ serpent come from Nicodemus’ confusion to Jesus’ earlier words: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit...” (v.3). In fitting form, Jesus responds to Nicodemus’ confusion (“How can these things be?” (v.9)) not only with a symbol deeply familiar to the learned Pharisee, but with a paradox which lies at the heart of the gospel itself: Death as the gateway to Life.

Think of the absurdity of the solution which Moses, through God, offered to the people of Israel as they lay stricken by venomous serpents for resisting the manna from heaven: “Turn to this symbol of the very death which struck you...and find life.” Imagine how cruel this must have appeared to the men and women as they lay on the sandy desert floor: A brazen Death lifted high above them, said to be a beacon of Life.

Is this not the same call which was given to us by our Savior two weeks ago? “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and

take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it..." (Mark 8). Think of the head-scratching foolishness of our gospel: A Jewish peasant nailed to a tree, executed as a political prisoner by the Romans. *This is the way to Life?*

This is a paradox to us because the Gospel of Christ calls us to turn our hearts to see a truth we have willfully blinded ourselves to. Is it not our tendency to shut our eyes to the parts of our hearts which we have barred to God's Love, the venomous wounds which ail us, by and through which we harm others? Are we not led by a world which seeks to distract us from our deep need for something More with flashing bobble and cheap amusements? Are we as a society not content to cast aside our eyes as we pass our homeless neighbor, shrug with paralyzing apathy at yet another school massacre, numb ourselves from our brokenness with yet another drink, yet another relationship, yet another financial gain?

The Cross of Christ shatters our illusion, disrupts our complacency, confronts our brokenness and says "This is the way to Life." It stands as a beacon, and in pointing the way to God, the light shines most painfully in the darkest corners of our hearts. To step on to the path which it illuminates for us is to willingly begin the process of dying to an old way of being: It is the death of the shallow life, the life centered only on personal gain, or pleasure, or happiness. It is the death of old patterns of behavior, it is the death the grip of the past. We must first

pick up the heavy cross of this realization before we can enter in to the new life promised to us by the Resurrection of Jesus; there is no other way.

And we rejoice this Sunday, in the midst of Lent, a paradoxical time which Sergius Bulgakov called a Luminous Sorrow, because we have a certain hope that on the other side of this cross lays an empty tomb. We only have the strength to undergo the death to self required for true repentance because we anticipate the gleam of the Light of Christ's Resurrection which will shatter the darkest night of the soul. It is the sorrow of Calvary which gives the joy of Easter its strength.

So walk this dolorous way with me these remaining weeks of Lent. Rejoice with me, paradoxically, in our current period of sorrow, for we know that it leads us to Resurrected life. Turn and look to the man on that tree; look and be saved.

Die...that you might live.

AMEN

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