



SUNDAY SERMON

From Saviors to Idols

A couple of weeks ago, I was talking on the phone to my 99 year old mother. After listening to some of her woes - not winning any money at her bridge game, a sore neck, I ventured that I was just feeling pretty down about our country in general and particularly about the school shooting in Florida. I was feeling that no one was doing anything about guns or solving any of our pressing problems. I was feeling helpless myself. Mom said, "Well, you preach don't you? You can speak up!" Mom seldom mentions my preaching; she's far more likely to tell me about the tall handsome pastor in her church and how great his sermons are, so this got my attention. "You know, Mom, you're right - I can speak, and I can write, and actually, I have a sermon coming up at St. Columba's in a couple of weeks, so thanks for the prodding." What follows is my response to that prodding. And it is a sermon about idolatry in two parts, based on our two readings.

The first passage, from Numbers - about Moses' making a bronze serpent to be held up on a pole to heal snake bites struck me upon reading it as quite bizarre! Especially as we're first told that it was God who actually sent poisonous snakes that killed many of the people. What kind of God? What kind of cure? Looking at a bronze snake? This makes no sense today, either in terms of our understanding of God or what we know about snake bites. But for God's people then, the snake was a good snake, a sign of deliverance and protection, a miracle that God had ordered. The bronze snake had healing powers; it would protect God's people.

But then things changed. If we jump ahead hundreds of years, to the reign in Judah of King Hezekiah, a faithful follower of God, we learn that he tore this bronze snake down and broke it in pieces. It was no longer a good snake, but a bad snake - it had become an idol in the temple, and people worshiped it, lit incense before it and completely forgot what purpose it had served originally. The bronze serpent had lost its power to save; it had become a false savior. And as with any change, particularly when it comes to cherished idols, some people were mad - they probably formed a "Save our Snake" committee!

In order to make some sense of this passage, to once more search for God's word in a puzzling story, I have come to understand the story of the bronze serpent as a story about idolatry and of how a true savior can become a false savior.

Perhaps we can think about our country's relationship with guns as a similar kind of story, especially in light of the widespread outrage and demand for action after the latest gun massacre and the daily death toll caused by guns all over the country. Could our national history with guns be a story about idolatry?

Guns were so important at the time our constitution was written. They allowed for hunting, a necessary activity for many to be able to feed their families. But beyond that, guns were important for self-defense, and sadly, for conquest

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DATE

Lent IV
Sunday, Mar. 11, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Susan Flanders

VERSES

Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21

of native populations as we gradually took over a new continent. And for the founding fathers, guns were deemed necessary to enable a militia to protect the citizens' freedom against any who might try to re-introduce tyranny in their young democracy. Hence the 2nd Amendment to our constitution protecting the right of the people to keep and bear arms. Guns started out as a kind of savior, a source of protection - like the bronze serpent.

But, like the bronze serpent, guns have become an idol for many, and the right to have guns - of any kind, in any amount has become a near article of worship for some. The NRA and gun makers can be seen as the priesthood - elevating our guns to sacred status, equating them with a power and potency that must be maintained.

I'm hoping that perhaps now we are in a Hezekiah moment, a time like the one so long ago when the bronze serpent was destroyed. Can we begin to see guns for what they have become, far too prevalent, too high-powered, false saviors in too often, the wrong hands? False saviors - not only with no power to save but with horrific power to destroy. Can we recognize the worship of assault weapons as the idolatry that it is, and can we stand up to those who continue to bow down at the shrine of unfettered access to murder weapons? I hope we are at a turning point, and the activism, particularly of young people who aren't willing to stand for continued inaction by our political leaders is heartening. I almost don't dare to hope this, because we've been here before, and nothing has happened. But, maybe, maybe, this time.

I hope you've seen Ledlie's letter in the newsletter and are aware of our Diocese's participation in the March for Our Lives on March 24. There are a number of ways you can participate in or support this event - all the information you need about this is on the St. Columba's web site, so please do check it out, under News. The passion and energy of so many young people continues and calls to us adults to make up for years of inadequate responses to gun violence. It's time to turn away from the hold of these weapons and the daily violence they foster; we need to bring down these false saviors.

So let's talk now about real saviors - and we do need salvation that is real and lasting and true. You won't be surprised that I'll now turn to the Gospel passage from John, but you may be surprised at where it takes me. The passage begins by comparing Moses' lifting up of the serpent to Jesus' being lifted up on the cross - probably the reason that passage from Numbers was chosen for today. But then John moves to one of the most quoted passages in the gospels: "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 continues on to say that Jesus was sent to save, not condemn the world. So far, so good; I agree. But then John goes on to proclaim that those who don't believe are condemned, that they are judged as lovers of darkness and doers of evil. John clearly limits salvation here to those who believe in Jesus as God's son and those who do what is true, those who do what is right.

his passage asserts two things that I find theologically objectionable. One is that salvation comes only through belief in Jesus, and the other is that God's judgment depends on our deeds. Despite the famous "God so loved the world" verse, I find rest of the reading troubling. I wonder if here too we are seeing a movement from a saving message to a kind of idolatry - shocking as that may seem.

I do believe that Jesus on the cross, the original story, has saving power - but what is that? What do we worship when we lift high the cross? If we understand Jesus as the incarnation of God in our humanity, then in the crucifixion, we see a God who is never absent from us, no matter how abandoned and betrayed, with us in darkness and sin and suffering, God in Jesus, nailed up in all his fragile humanity, suffering the worst of human cruelty. And then, we see the cross empty - the miracle of the Easter story - that God can also bring about new life, no matter what, even if not the particular kind of new life we've wanted or expected. The original story can also be seen to express God's forgiveness of our human capacity to sin, in that the sin of the crucifixion was not the last word of the story. Jesus' followers, sinful people like us, found it in them to be a community of faith and practice and hope that changed the world. Salvation indeed! Jesus on the cross as a symbol of

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God's love for the world, Jesus on the cross as a true savior. If this is who Jesus was, then it is also who we are all called to be - bearers of God's presence and love - here and now in our world. In the Jesus story I am reminded that God's love does not depend on our good deeds, is not snuffed out by our sins. And, because of Jesus, I can look for God's love and presence in all of us, in every single human being. I can see the cross, first laden with the suffering, dying Jesus, but then the cross empty, with Jesus' spirit forever alive. I can see in Jesus our own stories of life and death in the arms of God's love.

But look what has sometimes happened with even this beloved symbol. Over centuries of history, has it too become an idol? Has it too lost its power to save? When belief in Jesus as the divine Son of God and in his death and resurrection as God's ultimate saving act excludes everyone who doesn't share this belief or even know about it, I think it does become an idol, a symbol as cold and hard as bronze. When Christians marauded unbelievers in the Crusades, massacred native Americans in our early history, slaughtered millions of Jews in the Holocaust, they acted in the name of a false savior, a savior of their own devising. And we are not immune today to these exclusions, whether it be through immigration laws, or the hypocrisies of religious and political leaders who make outcasts of classes of people who look or speak or believe differently than they do.

Unfortunately, passages like this can be used to justify some of our worst instincts. We need to critique scripture and avoid literalism. We need to listen for where it has saving power and where it does not. I love it that here, at the end of a scripture reading, we say "For the Word of God in scripture, for the word of God among us, for the word of God within us, thanks be to God." This protects us from scriptural idolatry, prompts us to use our hearts and minds to search for how God is moving in our lives now and to reject old ways of believing if they have become stale rather than life-giving. We need to get rid of the bronze serpents and lift them up no longer.

So what are we really seeking, what do we really mean, by salvation? The word salvation has the same root as the word salve - something we rub on a wound to heal it. We might think of salvation as healing the wounds of existence, and we no longer need to think of salvation as something that happens or not, after we die. Salvation is available now - it's about how we become whole, how we heal, how we love and open ourselves to being loved. For me, parts of John's gospel vision, with its exclusivity and its equation of good behavior with some kind of everlasting life has no power. It is like the bronze serpent.

What are your idols? What have you turned to for protection and safety, and when have you been let down? So many things start out offering real saving power to make our lives better, achievements and money and status and connections, even love, even, sometimes religion. They enrich our lives - except when they don't, when they turn hollow, when they become all-important, and when we believe that only by succeeding in these ways do we have lives of meaning and value. Salvation, real, saving help, comes in many forms - often unexpected. As we move towards Easter, may our souls be open to those people, those moments when we sense God's presence, in ourselves, in one another and in our hurting world, those times when love shines in the face of darkness and we know ourselves to be truly saved. Amen.