

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Lent 4B) – March 15, 2015
Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Turn in the Direction of the Skid

I remember my driver's education class and especially my six hours on the road as a 16-year old student driver, maneuvering my instructor's souped-up Camaro. Oh, that Camaro. It was a pretty powerful car alright! What makes it all the more memorable, I admit, was the fact that as I was pulling into the driveway of the driving school to get my certificate, I mistakenly accelerated and put a gaping hole in the side of a Lincoln Continental that just happened to be in my way! Now, I also remember one other thing that I took in during that training—memorable because it seemed to me then, and now, to be so counter-intuitive—and that's the lesson about turning toward or into the direction of the skid. You know, rather than being caught in a skid and resist the direction of the skid, it is a wiser thing to turn into or towards the skid in order to regain control, come out of the skid and avoid a crash. That has been a useful lesson to me as a driver on a few occasions, not to mention an even more useful lesson for living.

In our readings today, we encounter two stories with strange twists that describe ways in which we people of God have been encouraged to practice our faith by turning in the direction of the skid. The first story from the book of Numbers describes how the Hebrew people, having been liberated from slavery in Egypt, were being led by Moses in the wilderness, and had decided they were not having a good time. At this part of their journey we hear them speak out against God and Moses, saying, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." No matter that they had been delivered from bondage in Egypt and had been given their freedom and were close to their promised land. They complained loudly. And then there's this bizarre turn. To deal with this complaining, as the story goes, "then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died." The people and Moses are quite shocked by such a raw display of God's power; and, apologizing for their outburst, they want to know how to get out of this terrifying situation. As the story goes, Moses is told, "make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." By taking their problem and lifting it up on a pole to hold in front of the people—in their faces as it were—the story says that the answer to their problem is to turn and face right into it.

From this rather bizarre story we fast forward some 1,200 years to the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus recorded in the Gospel of John. Jesus has been gaining a reputation as both a wonder worker and a radical teacher, and has attracted the attention of another notable teacher, the highly respected Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness. In their nighttime conversation, Jesus first tells Nicodemus, that to understand him, you have to be born again or anew, or from above. Nicodemus trips over a literal understanding of Jesus' words, Jesus' metaphor for the spiritual practice of engaging in radically fresh thinking. And Jesus sums up this fresh thinking in a few powerful lines, the first of which has been often reduced to signs at

football games—John 3:16—“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.” And Jesus connects this back to that bizarre story of the poisonous snakes among the Israelites in the wilderness, as he tells Nicodemus, “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, in the same spirit as the story of the snake lifted on the pole in Numbers, just after the famous John 3:16 quote, Jesus adds a not as famous, but equally important line, in the next verse, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Serpents on a stick connected to salvation?—how do they connect? Could it be that God helps us to address our most difficult problems by putting them in our face, by having us turn towards them in order to somehow work through them, and encounter God’s grace and mercy? As my former colleague, Bill Tully, put it, “When the people did not understand what was happening to them, when they denied the truth that freedom entails a certain danger in living, God told Moses to take the danger and hold it up on a stick and show it to them. Many centuries later, when people were confused about how to live a whole and abundant life, Jesus was ‘lifted up’ on a stick—the Cross. The fate of that good and loving human being—his violent end—was certainly put in our face.”ⁱ

Serpents on sticks and the Son of Man being lifted up—God loves us precisely this way, by having us both face our issues and, through that, seeing God in Christ who takes on the full measure of our troubled human condition. In spiritual and existential terms, we all find ourselves caught in a skid and, continuing out of control, at times, end in a crash. God in Christ turns into the existential skid, as it were, and has us look there and discover, in the words of Pogo, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Yet Christ lifted up on the cross is not only the foremost sign of our human sinfulness, but it is also the chief symbol of God’s grace and mercy and the full measure of God’s forgiveness. For, as William Sloane Coffin put it,

“...the cross tells us that you can kill God’s Love, but you cannot keep it dead and buried; [and] that there are more important tragedies than the tragedy of death; and [that] no victory [is] more important than the triumph of [God’s] love. The cross tells us that where sin increases, [God’s] grace [and mercy] abound all the more...The world will be saved if, by the grace of God, [people of faith] do not refuse their own crosses, but allow them to become lightning rods to ground the world’s [fear, ignorance and] hatred; and [then become as] determined as Christ himself, that where sin increases, grace [and mercy] will all the more abound.”ⁱⁱ

It is when we stare at the serpent on the stick, at Christ on the Cross, and, with God’s help, turn in the direction of the skid, that we can address our issues and meet Christ even in those dark or dangerous places. The good news is that we are beloved daughters and sons of an all-Loving God who knows all about us, and who loves us anyway. And what does this Loving God do? Well, God holds up what we need to see and turns in the direction of our skid, showing us how to do the same, thus handing us responsibility for our own problems. Salvation in the hands of this kind of Loving God is very counter-intuitive: turn in the direction of the skid in order to gain control of the skid. How might this

begin? Well, listen to the mystic, Rumi, as he compares human living as though we were running a guest house. He wrote,

“This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.”

Life is filled with serpents and skids. Our readings today suggest we keep an eye out for them, and before it's too late. As Bill Tully put it, “See if you can see one or two of those moments in the moment, and not centuries later—so you can get it before it's too late to turn in the direction of the skid. Seeing and turning are God's gifts of love to us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ William McD. Tully, “Serpents and skids” (New York City: St. Bartholomew's Church. Sermon preached on March 26, 2006).

ⁱⁱ William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 52, 55.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tully, *Ibid.*