

## **The Journey with Snakes and Crosses**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Myrick T. Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, March 22, 2009.*

Discovering sobriety is a journey. The trek to God's Promised Land is a journey. Receiving the light of Jesus' transforming love is a journey. Snakes and crosses can guide us along the way.

During a two-year interval, between my first and second years of seminary when our second daughter Katherine was born, I worked in a hospital-based alcoholism treatment program, supervising counseling, education, and research. Prior to that time I really hadn't known much about the disease of alcoholism, and those two years were invaluable in forming me as a priest.

The program used a family systems approach, and patients could only be admitted if their families were willing to participate. For some, this was a problem. Alcoholism affects everyone in the family, not only the individual who has been designated the "alcoholic." As I learned, alcoholism is chronic, progressive, and fatal. Untreated, it leads to premature death.

I remember how shocked I was to encounter spouses or partners who were anxious to have their significant others "cured," but who were unwilling to face their own dysfunctional behavior. Coping strategies and survival skills had become so familiar and effective enough, that the thought of changing these patterns was more threatening than accepting the destructive and crazy sickness into which the family relationships had degenerated. The alcoholic family behavior, as insane as it was, had become the norm.

Family members as well as the alcoholic become slaves to the disease. Major changes, which recovery mandated, brought up fear of letting go, and launching out into the unknown uncharted waters of sobriety and new life.

Alcoholism is like wandering in another wilderness.

At last Wednesday night's Seder supper, the guest rabbi asked us how we today were enslaved, as we retold the story of how our ancestors were led out of slavery toward freedom in the Promised Land. Collapsing the thousands of years between the deliverance we were celebrating at that historic landmark meal, and our personal experiences of captivity in 2009 made the point. Their journeys are our journeys. Our stories of seeking God and faith in Jesus Christ are their stories of trying to follow a powerful, yet forgiving deity.

Soon, during Holy Week, we will be invited to participate in the climaxing saga of Jesus' passionate journey to the cross and beyond --- the ultimate triumph of freedom out of slavery and the singular new life. But not yet; we still have some preparations to make.

So what about this classic journey recounted in part for us in today's reading from the Book of Numbers? The people became impatient on the way.

Sound familiar? (Well, has our new President fixed the economy yet?)

If you read the complete account of the Israelites' famous journey, you will soon discover this is not an isolated phenomenon. There was a line a mile long at Moses' customer service counter every morning. They could not keep their eyes on the prize. Culinary taste overshadowed political freedom and national salvation. They complained against God and against Moses, "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."

Where has God been leading you recently? Where are you on the journey? And how's the food?

Then the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and they bit the people so that many Israelites died.

I do not think the point of this lesson is: "Don't complain." However, having gotten their attention off their stomachs, and back on track, Moses heard their confession: "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take the snakes away."

Notice they did not ask Moses to pray to God to give them better food. It's all a matter of perspective and food suddenly tastes better when you have poisonous snakes lurking around the corner of your tent.

So Moses prayed for the people, and the Lord told him to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole so that people who were bitten could look at it and live. Note that God did not take the snakes away. The Lord did not remove the problem, but provided a means of salvation in the problem.

The bronze snake was a powerful symbol. First, it was a reminder of serpent magic as practiced in Egypt, from where they were being led out of slavery. So in some sense it suggested, "Remember where you were in slavery."

And then it pointed to the source of salvation... salvation from death from poisonous snake bites, and beyond that, to a God who was hearing and responding to their cries. It was a sign of absolution for their sins of unfaithfulness and griping. The power of symbol cannot be overstated in our faith journey.

Jesus' conversation in the darkness with Nicodemus in the third chapter of John's gospel, is about the personal journey of spiritual transformation. After trying to explain to Nicodemus that salvation has now become a spiritual experience through the gift of a new birth from above, he connects the symbol of his own death on a cross, with the symbol of the bronze snake Moses made in the wilderness.

"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."

Every time the acolytes walk up or down the aisle holding that cross before us, it is a prompt to remember from where you have come on your journey with Christ.

Whenever you gaze on the cross on the chapel altar or the one suspended over the altar in the Nave, be reminded that "God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, (whatever the source of snake bites we may have suffered), made us alive together with Christ..."

When you hear the words of absolution pronounced following the General Confession, remember that it is "...by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works..."

The journey out of slavery into freedom is fraught with all of John Bunyan's human character complaints and more. Finding God and love is a rough and bumpy road with many treacherous turns and circuitous detours, even dead ends. Like a family addicted to alcohol wandering in a wilderness of destruction, fear may keep us in darkness and prevent us from turning around to receive the light.

I see this same salvation journey unfolding in the world today. Free will, we are discovering, has willed greed and irresponsible decisions by many who have led our economy. The unbridled accumulation of wealth has infected us all. Yes, we have complaints. We detest this miserable food. But we must believe that out of the chaos, once again, our Creator will bring a clearer order, more pervasive justice and deeper peace. Our lives are being winnowed, pruned, fired, and molded. What opportunities for anticipating Easter renewal! But not without Holy Week.

But I believe this is a time to make a bronze serpent.... perhaps a bronze dollar sign. How would that look in our procession? Foolish, of course. Our symbol is the cross of Christ crucified.

That is the symbol of the journey we are making. And despite the challenges all along the way, our symbol proclaims the good news that God still loves the world.

"And whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live." You may very likely encounter snake bites along your journey. Keep your eyes on the cross and live.

Amen.

*Ref: Numbers 21.4-9; Ephesians 2.1-10; John 3.14-21*